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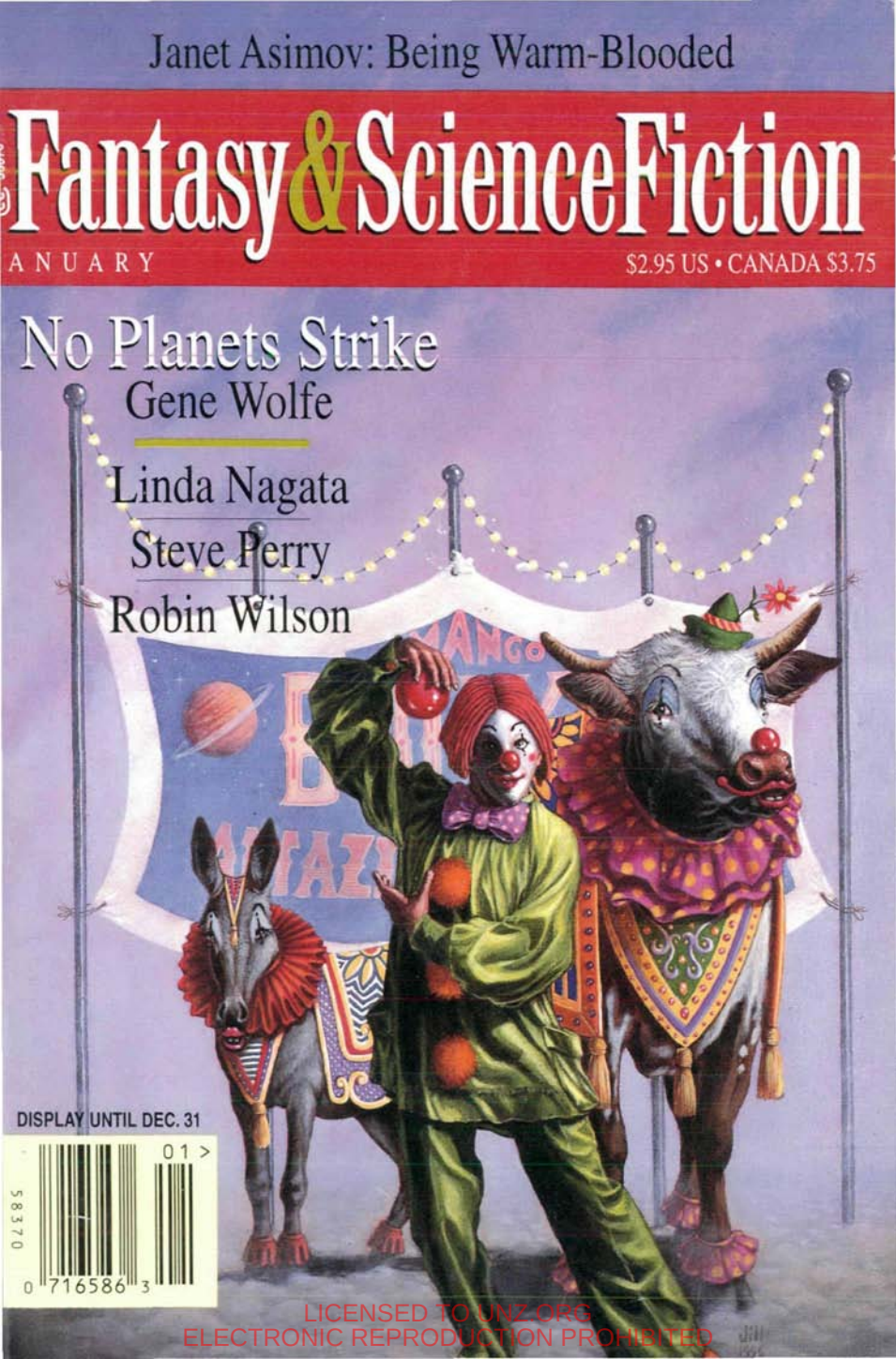

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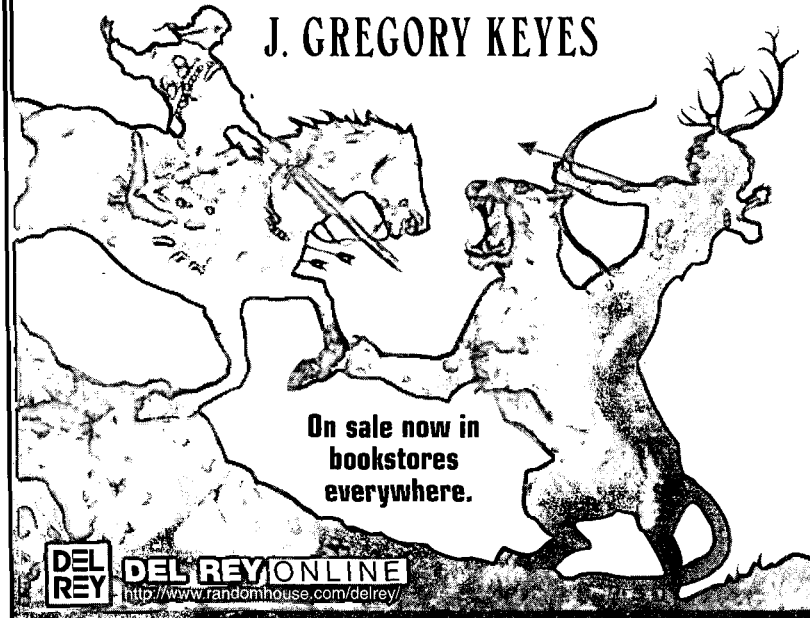

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EDITORIAL

KRISTINE KATHRYN RUSCH

BY THE TIME you read this, the frenzy will be over. The excitement has already died down as I write this editorial in September of 1996. But since I have just written a series that discusses the problems with publishing, I feel I should discuss one of its successes.

Stephen King's *The Green Mile.*

I've always had great admiration for King. He is arguably our best storyteller, one of our best stylists (when he chooses to be), and in some ways, the man who can tap into our national subconscious. Given his tremendous success at such a young age, he could have stopped writing altogether, or continued writing tried and true horror novels in the vein of *Carrie* or *The Shining*. Instead, each book has taken risks. Sometimes the risks work. Sometimes they don't.

The Green Mile works.

As I write this, King has six books on the bestseller list, and an article in yesterday's newspaper claims he will have eight on the list by week's end, a record that, as the newspaper says, "no one is disputing."

The six bestselling King books are all sections of *The Green Mile.*

For those of you who managed to avoid bookstores, airports, and grocery checkout lines since April, *The Green Mile* is a novel published in six parts. It is a well plotted meditation on death, dying, and survival set in part in two prisons: Cold Mountain Penitentiary during the thirties, and a nursing home in 1996. The narrator, one Paul Edgecombe, is witness to magical happenings on Death Row in Cold Mountain, the place where men wait before they walk "the green mile" to the electric chair. Edgecombe, who writes of the events of the past as memoir from his room in the nursing home, has a reason for writing now. And that reason King wisely refuses to reveal until Part Six.

I suspect *The Green Mile* will work well as a single volume novel,

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but I feel sad for those of you who waited to read the book all at once. You've missed something. As King says in his introduction to the whole series:

> ...in a story which is published in installments, the writer gains an ascendancy over the reader which he or she cannot otherwise enjoy: simply put, Constant Reader, you cannot flip ahead and see how matters turn out.

You also cannot stay up all night to finish the book. That was my frustration. I picked up *The Two Dead Girls*, the first installment of *The Green Mile*, on the day it came out partly because I was intrigued, and partly because I am a big King fan. I liked the idea of the experiment, and I expected a Perils of Pauline cliff-hanger novel that would leave Our Hero on the brink of some disaster at the end of part one.

Instead I read a subtle cliff-hanger, one based on characterization and the promise of suspense to come. I found that I couldn't shake the story during that month (which is just amazing considering how much I read), and I felt deep frustration at my inability to finish the book on my schedule. At the end of April, I was in our local bookstore on the day Part Two, *The Mouse on the Mile*, arrived. I read that section within two hours, and was alternately frustrated and pleased that I was enjoying the series so much.

I've spoken to other readers who've had the same experience, and we all agree that part of the joy of the series was the loss of control, the forced savoring of the novel, the willingness to read at someone else's pace. Had *The Green Mile* been bad or even mediocre, the experiment would have failed. Because it was so good, it worked beyond all expectations.

The publisher, Signet, expected this series to be a gimmick, a loss leader for King's future books. The novel sold (and continues to sell) beyond expectation. I know other novels in installments will follow: John Saul has just signed up to do one. But a serialized novel is, as King says, a precarious balancing act, a chance for critics to beat you up (or praise you) six times for the same work. It is, in my opinion, something only our best storytellers, our best stylists, can pull off with any degree of success.

My hat's off to Stephen King. He walked the wire with flare and panache.

And gave me a most marvelous reading experience, one that I will savor for years to come.

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Tor Books just released Gene Wolfe's new novel, Exodus from the Long Sun, *the final volume in* The Book of the Long Sun. *Gene most recently appeared in our October/November issue.*

"As well as I can remember," he writes, "'No Planets Strike' began with a reference to that speech at the beginning of Hamlet *in a book on clowns. I dug out the play and read the speech, and was struck by Shakespeare's idea that aliens could not attack on Christmas Eve. A couple of months passed, and I unconsciously mixed in the legend that animals can talk at midnight, when Christmas Eve becomes Christmas Day." The result is "No Planets Strike," the inspiration for Jill Bauman's cover.*

No Planets Strike

By Gene Wolfe

Some say that ever 'gainst that season comes
Wherein our Saviour's birth is celebrated,
This bird of dawning singeth all night long
And then, they say, no spirit dare stir abroad;
The nights are wholesome; then no planets strike,
No fairy takes, nor witch hath power to charm,
So hallow'd and so gracious is that time.

— *Hamlet* I.i.

YOU SURE YOU REALLY want to hear about all this? I mean, me and Bully weren't really the main ones.

Okay. Is that thing on?

Hi. My name's Donnie, and I'm a donkey. My friend's name is Bully, only he's not really a bull, you know what I mean? They cut off his — you know. So he wouldn't get mad. That's something lots of people don't

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understand, they think he can't. He can, only he hardly ever does. But if he does, watch out, because he's big and real strong. I'm not big, but I'm strong anyhow. You'd be surprised how much I can carry or how hard I can kick, and I can run a lot faster than you think, too.

As well as I can figure, we were born on Earth, only they didn't call it that back there, they called it Texas. There was a big school that had farms and ranches all over for trying out new seeds and new ways of growing silage and all that. And before we were ever born they did stuff to us to make us as smart as most people, and worked on our tongues and mouths some, too. Not enough to make us sound like you — we know we don't — but enough so you could understand us.

The idea was that there's still a lot of places like this one, where people are poor and use animals where rich people'd use machines. Like carrying firewood. If they're rich enough to have a donkey, they use him for that, or somebody like Bully to plow or pull a cart that's too big for me. They do all that here, probably you've seen it. And they thought if we could talk to those people and understand what they told us, it might be better.

I guess it didn't work out too good though, because after a few years they dropped the whole thing and sold us off. I really didn't know Bully up till then. I guess I'd seen him, but there were a lot around, cows mostly. If I did, I didn't pay attention. Maybe you've talked to him already?

He's mostly red and white, because there's Hereford in him, and black because of other stuff. His hump's from Santa Gertrudis, which is what his mom was, so there's Indian cattle and longhorns back there. I'm little, and gray like you see except for this mark on my back.

The way we got together was, the same man bought us both. His name was Mango. Mango the Clown. He taught us a lot of stuff we'd never known about back on the ranch, like various acts and Bully to let people ride on his back. We went to so many foreign worlds with Mango that I lost count after a while. I can count up to ten, usually. It was more than that, so I started counting tens. I know you'd do it different, but that was the only thing I could think of that would work for me, or Bully either. But after a while I sort of forgot, because what difference did it make? Besides, sometimes we went back to one where we'd been before if the tip had been good.

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We're clowns too, and we're pretty famous now. I guess you've seen us.

We'd get painted up and put on ruffs. That's what you call the big collars, they're ruffs. Mango'd beat his drum to get us a crowd, and we'd put on one of our clown acts.

Like, Mango would be trying to lead me, only Bully would be lying down and Mango not see him, and he'd back into one of Bully's horns and jump, and Bully'd beller. We didn't any of us talk when we did our acts, and that sure was a swell idea of Mango's, I mean nobody talking, because it would've got us killed here on Sidhe. Quick, too. There's witches here, and the Beautiful Ones don't like them one little bit.

Then Mango'd put his finger up to his head and have an idea, and wink at everybody. He'd tie me to Bully so Bully'd pull me along, and that way I'd have to go. He'd do it, and Bully wouldn't get up. Mango'd kick him and poke him and holler at him, but Bully'd just yawn. Finally Mango'd back off and talk to both of us, only without talking, if you know what I mean. Talk with his eyes and face and hands, and his whole body. He'd show how he got us when we were little, and what good care he'd taken of us — we'd shake our heads at that — how he'd fed us and nursed us when we were sick. Then he'd say how all that was over now. He was going to sell us to the butcher — pointing to a butcher's shop, if there was one on that street — and the butcher'd cut our throats and skin us, and chop us up to sell. He'd say that I was pork, Mango'd say, and he'd say Bully was donkey meat.

That'd get Bully mad. He'd jump up and paw the ground and snort, and then he'd chase Mango around and around in a big circle, with me still tied to him standing in the middle and turning around to watch them. Pretty soon he'd get tired and Mango'd get tired, and they wouldn't run any more, just walk. Then Bully'd lie down where he'd been lying down before, with Mango panting and mopping up sweat.

That's when I'd come up behind him and stand on my hind legs, and tap him on the shoulder with one of my front hoofs — that usually got the biggest laugh in the whole act. He'd turn around the wrong way, and I'd be down again. I'd try to get him to get on my back, pulling on his clown coat with my teeth and pushing him with my head, and making regular donkey noises, but he never would get the idea. After a lot of that — as long as it was getting good laughs — I'd get him to standing straddle-legged and

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then run between his legs and sort of scoop him up. Mango was one of those tall, skinny birds, and he'd have to pull his legs way up to keep his feet from dragging. Then I'd climb up on Bully's back, and he'd stand up, and the three of us would go 'round in a circle, me on Bully and Mango on me. And after that we'd pass the hat.

That was just one act, you understand. We had a lot of others, and if the money was good in a certain part of town, we'd go back there again next day and put on a different act. When we'd played out a city, we'd go on to another one, and when we'd played all the cities or Mango could find a way to get to some other world cheap, away we'd go. There were places where we could've stayed on and on, if you ask me, just going around five or six towns. But that wasn't Mango. If he'd wanted to live like that, he'd never have become a clown at all, he said. He told me once he wanted to see new smiles, and maybe that was it.

We'd loop back sometimes, and loop around. But somehow we were always outward bound, out toward the rim and farther every year. He'd meet somebody, some sailor usually, and he'd talk about someplace he'd just been to, what a hellhole it was. And after that, Mango'd always be itching to go there. He'd talk about it and me and Bully'd say it sounded pretty bad, all the killing and storms, bad air, nothing but trouble. And Mango'd say think how much they'd love us there, how they need somebody like us. When Mango looked in a mirror, I don't think he saw what other people saw, but something a whole lot bigger and nicer. And the longer he's gone, the more I get to thinking he was right, that was what was there, and not the long skinny bird with the long skinny face that I always saw when I looked at him. Now I like to think he's gone someplace better, that he's played out this universe and caught a ship up to a new one where there's sweet grass and clean water all over. Only Mango'd go down below, if he could. He'd think about how bad it was and how they needed us, and he'd say it was just for a couple weeks and go.

That's how it was going to be when we came here. Just a couple weeks. We've been here close to ten years, I think, me and Bully have now.

There aren't a lot of worlds with their own intelligent native races, I guess everybody knows that. And the ones that have them, that world's theirs, and generally they won't let humans settle on it at all. Sidhe's different, because the intelligent race here is the Beautiful Ones and

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there's nothing else in the galaxy like them. That's what I hear, and it's probably a real good thing too. The Beautiful Ones will let people come, only they can't have children here. Probably you've heard about that already.

People need a lot of high-class science to change genes and make something better. You take Bully and me. It was one of the smartest women on Earth that did us, and all the others there that could have done it too could've sat down in her living room. The Beautiful Ones don't have any science and don't want it, but they've got that built in, just like Bully's got all his stomachs. Whenever one's fixing to have a child, that child's going to look a lot like she wanted it to. She doesn't have to do anything but want, and the more she wants it the closer she gets.

So when the first humans got here, and they had ships and crawlers and all that, the Beautiful Ones thought that stuff was really swell, and every generation got to looking more and more like people until pretty soon it was like it is now, and the Beautiful Ones look a whole lot better than real people do, taller than Mango, most of them, and faces so pretty it sort of hurts to look at them, especially when you know they're not people at all. You've seen some, right?

Well, maybe I do, but I can't say it very good. I haven't got all the words. They move around like they're dancing all the time. And as soon as you see one, you know she's the best dancer in the whole universe. Or he is. Their hair's like the gold stuff you see in a jewelry store, and their skin's the color of bread baking, just starting to get brown. Their teeth are just so, and their eyes are all kinds of funny colors, and change while you're looking at them. That's what Mango said. I can't see most colors very good, but he knew a lot about them. I can't dance, either; not a lick, but I sing a little. Is that enough about the Beautiful Ones?

Okay. They wanted people to settle here, and they still do. Most won't, because word's gotten around. You were pretty brave to come, is what I think.

Well, I sure hope they don't. They're not very good at keeping promises. I don't think it's forgetting or even badness as much as it's just that the promising idea doesn't make much sense to them. They don't really understand it. If I were you I'd get out quick and not tell anybody I was going till I'd gone.

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People still come, though, mostly the ones that are too poor to go anyplace else. You know how it is. If a world thinks you're probably going to need a lot of help, they won't let you come. Not even just to stop over. But Sidhe will take all those, and the more kids they've got before they get here the better, so they'll grow up right here. Because on Sidhe nobody's going to look out for you except maybe your relatives and the folks next door.

We didn't have any relatives here, and we weren't living next door to anybody, really. We were going all around the way we always did, so there was just us. People kept telling us the Beautiful Ones wouldn't ever let us leave, so pretty soon Mango wanted to go and we came here and asked around at the spaceport. That's when we found out the people had been right. The Beautiful Ones weren't letting anybody go off world unless there was somebody that had gotten away already that was asking about them, and nobody was asking about us. The sailors were afraid to get off their ships, even, because they figured the Beautiful Ones wouldn't let them back on. Some Beautiful Ones would go out to the port at night, or when it was dark weather or raining, and dance for them, dance around the ship, mostly, or make a figure-of-eight around two ships, when there was two ships, and sometimes a sailor would come out.

Then a female or male would hook up with him, depending on what he wanted, and show him how to dance. Or her, if the sailor was a woman, and they'd all dance some more. And finally they'd go off together, with the sailor grinning and waving to his friends on the ship. That sailor'd hardly ever come back, though.

We tried and tried, Mango talking to various ones, only nothing ever came of it. There were days — I remember two — when we went out to the port, Mango thinking we were going to get on a ship sure, only we never quite would. Then one day he said he thought he had a way to do it, but it would only work for him, not for us, so he was going to take it, and when he got offworld he'd start in on anybody from Earth that he could find, viewing the ambassador, and letters, and all that, and get us off too. We said fine, because I didn't believe he'd really get off himself and neither did Bully.

This is something I'd rather I didn't have to tell about, but I guess I do. The way Mango'd found, or thought he had, was to hide in a cargo canister.

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The one he picked was full of furs, and the captain wanted it fumigated before he'd take it on board for fear there was fleas in them or something. So they opened it up and sprayed stuff in and Mango coughed, and that was how they found him.

And they killed him. There was two Beautiful Ones there to see nobody got away on that ship, is what we heard, and they chopped him up with their swords.

No, they can't make swords or much of anything. But they make people make the things for them, swords and lots of other stuff. That's why they want people here, to make stuff for them and make stuff to trade. Like those furs. It was people who caught the animals and skinned them, and the Beautiful Ones were going to trade them offworld and buy stuff they wanted, flitters and blasters and ships of their own. So they want a ton of people to do that.

Sure they want kids. There's Beautiful Ones on the other worlds around here now to get more people to come, and if it's a big family they'll pay passage. But they don't want any kids born here, because they're scared of them. They're afraid that what their mothers will want is somebody that can beat up the Beautiful Ones. The mothers would want it, too, I guess, only wanting doesn't work for people ....

All right, if you'd really like to hear. I don't know anything about anything except clowning, I know that, and maybe it's just being here too long. But sometimes I wonder if the Beautiful Ones aren't right and the people wrong. Maybe people do get what they want a little, sometimes, or even animals like me and Bully do. Because everybody here kept talking about it. How if ever it happened and the Beautiful Ones didn't kill it, that'd be one that'd put people on top and the Beautiful Ones on the bottom, or anyhow make them treat people better. That kid would be, when he grew up.

Oh, sure. It happens. It happens a lot. Some woman and her husband get careless, or maybe just a boy and a girl. But the Beautiful Ones always hear. And pretty soon after the baby comes, they come too. What happened this time —

Right. I'm starting off before I'm hitched up, I guess.

With Mango gone, Bully and me figured to go on clowning by ourselves. We worked up a couple of acts for just the two of us, and we

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could pass the hat like we had before, holding it in our teeth. Only the first time we did it I could see it wasn't going to work. For one thing, we couldn't paint our faces the way Mango had, and without paint it didn't feel right. Another one was somebody was always grabbing us and saying we belonged to him. We had to hurt a couple of those birds pretty bad, and we didn't like that.

So pretty soon even Bully could see we needed somebody, and we found this boy, Ezry, that hadn't ever had a father and his mother was gone. We pay him to own us, only he has to do what we say. There's been some bad times besides the good ones, but it's worked out pretty well. We're satisfied, and so's he. He paints our faces and buttons our ruffs, and beats Mango's drum to get us a crowd just like Mango used to. Did you catch our act?

It's really pretty simple. I'm carrying a basket of corn on each side of me, and I come out and try to eat it myself. I circle around this way, only I can't get it. Then I try it the other way, going faster and faster, and get out of breath and walk around funny like I'm dizzy, and finally I fall down. It gets a big laugh.

Then Bully comes out, and he's got a basket on each side too, only his are bigger and full of hay. He reaches around as far as he can and gets a few straws, then he reaches around the other way and gets a few more. He's got this thing where he tries to hook a basket with his horn, and he almost gets it. Maybe he does get it a little, but then it slips off. Then he starts trying to untie the rope around his belly with his back hoofs, first the left one, then the right. Finally he puts his head down and looks between his front legs at his back ones, left then right. And he tries to use them both at the same time, and naturally sits down. About then I get up and try reaching my mouth straight over my back, and that doesn't work either.

Then Ezry comes out and whispers in our ears, and after that I eat hay out of Bully's baskets and he eats corn out of mine, and then we pass the hat.

That act gets some good laughs and brings in the cash, but there's more to it. See, we're saying to everybody that we've got to pull together and look out for each other, and that goes right along with this family you want to know about.

They were just country people from some village up-river. He lumbered up there, he said, and had a little sawmill and so on. Well, she was

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about to have the kid, and where they lived there wasn't anybody to help her, and you know somebody's going to tell the Beautiful Ones next time some come through. It's bound to happen. So they'd come down here trying to get a ship out, and you know how that is. You know what happened to Mango. Then she goes into labor.

It was Ezry that found out about them when the place where they'd been staying wouldn't let them back in, and I guess if he'd told her husband about Bully and me maybe they wouldn't have come at all. But maybe they would, because they didn't have any time to fool around. We bedded her down on clean hay that Bully forked out of our loft, and it could've been worse. People found out, naturally. You can't hide a thing like that very long here in the city where people are poor and got to live so close together. So they came and stood around and gawked, because most of them hadn't ever seen a real newborn for years and years, and some that came here as kids never had.

We got witches here. I guess you've heard. A lot of the worlds I've been on, they don't think there are any, but we've got plenty. If you ask me it's because somebody has to store up all the stuff people know. On most worlds it's computers and maybe teachers, and some in books. But on a world like Sidhe, well, they got a little school started here. It's the first one on Sidhe.

Anyway, this witch comes and tells everybody that this new kid the woman had, he's going to be the one. When he gets big he's going to kick the Beautiful Ones' teeth out and black their eyes, and after that people here are going to get a better shake. They'll be able to have kids of their own if they want them, and have a say in the way their taxes get spent and all that.

Then somebody laughed, a little skinny bird it was that'd worked his way to the front. This witch starts screeching at him, and he starts hollering back at her, so Bully shuts him up. Bully's got this big deep voice, you know? He says it's all true, and if the little bird don't believe it, he'll put a horn right through him, and anybody that runs off and tells Beautiful Ones about the new kid is in for a dose of the same.

Well, Bully's the best friend I've got, right? So I chime in. My voice isn't deep like his, but I can be pretty loud when I want to. The little bird shuts up and sort of stares at us, and after a minute I see they all are. Then

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he says, like he can't hardly get it out, he thought we didn't talk. So I say tonight we do, and Bully chimes in for me and says only tonight, but they better not talk themselves if they know what he means. So that's how we got to be sort of famous.

Right there's where we got lucky, too, because it's when the sheepherders came. There's a couple horses right beside this place Bully and me rent, and I guess somebody'd come in and got a horse, and when he got out into the country he told everybody. Anyway there was eight or ten sheepherders, and there's some real bad animals here on Sidhe, so if you're going to keep sheep you'd better be a real tough bird with some real tough dogs. They all had those big sticks, too, and when they talked folks listened.

So it was quiet, pretty quiet anyhow, for a week or so, and the Beautiful Ones never did catch on. Then three teachers from the new school came by — I guess three was all they had back then. They'd been passing the hat for this country family, and they'd gotten up quite a nice chunk of change.

Oh, sure, me and Bully put in some too, for Mango.

And with that much they were able to get a ship, just like they'd wanted when they came here. Folks say they went to some world called Biladmaser. Only some say Barrmaser, so I guess nobody really knows, or somebody heard somebody else wrong, you know how that is. But I know they really did get on a ship, because I took her and her new kid out to the port and watched her and her husband climb in it, him carrying the kid. Then I watched — we all did, that's Bully and me and Ezry — till it took off. I don't know if she waved or anything, except for when she was about to go in, because I couldn't see for sure. Ezry says she did, and he's got real good eyes. But I was the one she sat on, her nursing her new kid, all the way out there. Every time Bully reminds me he was the first one to talk to the people the night the new kid was born, I remind him about that.

Really? You think they're back here? You don't say! Out in the boondocks somewhere, I guess. It'd have to be. Only I don't know anything about it. I never heard a thing about them coming back till you said so, and probably I'll forget, too, as soon as you're out of here.

You ever think about how the Beautiful Ones are going to stick your feet in the fire if they hear you know something like that? You better know

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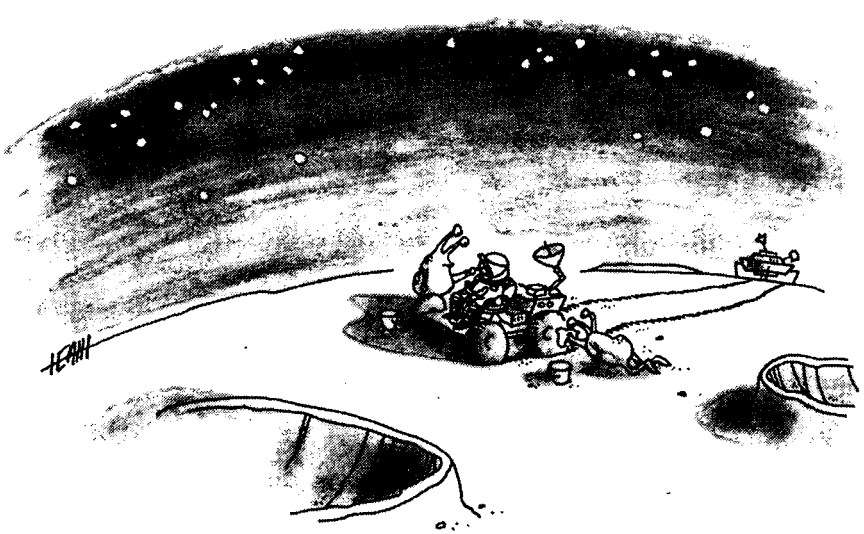
exactly where they are, and no mistakes, and who's hiding them and the rest of it. Because they're going to keep on doing this and that till you tell them all that stuff. You ever see them when they throw them into the street after a little conversation like that? Fingernails torn off, and they can't stand up or anything. They holler for their friends and relatives, but their friends and relatives know there's Beautiful Ones watching to see who tries to help. Pretty soon the street dogs come. The ones that got thrown out can generally keep them off at first, but when there gets to be too many to count, it's all over.

Yeah, I figured you didn't really know anything about her and her husband and the kid coming back. I figured you were just blowing off, because I do it too, sometimes — smartass is what Bully says. You have a real nice trip back to Earth, and when you get there you tell them I really don't know much of anything about whatever might be going on out here.

How could I? I'm just a donkey. ☙



"That's a negative on the tip, Houston.
My wallet's in my other suit."

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Books To Look For

CHARLES DE LINT

In a Pig's Ear, by Paul Bryers, Farrar, Strauss, & Giroux, $23

THE PIG'S ear into which this story is told has been befriended by Milan Kubanicek who lives on a farm/sanitarium, imprisoned for a crime that we only learn about near the end of the book. Kubanicek thinks he's a reincarnation of Merlin, now reliving a version of the old legend wherein the original Merlin was imprisoned with a pig by the enchantress Vivien.

This Merlin was born in Czechoslovakia at the tail end of World War II, and his story ranges from war-torn Europe to Hollywood and back again to Europe, most notably the present-day no man's land of the Death Strip that divided West and East Berlin before the wall came down. His Arthur is filmmaker Adam Epstein — think Steven Spielberg in terms of his success and clout — his Guinevere, Epstein's Irish-born wife, Jackie. Lancelot shows up as an old lover of Jackie's. Mordred's here as an illegitimate son of Epstein, born after a brief affair he had in Czechoslovakia with a woman named Magda (who rounds out the story nicely as a particularly nasty version of Morgana).

The novel begins slowly and the mythic background is not so much on stage as there to provide a resonance. And while *In A Pig's Ear* does follow much of the basic Arthurian storyline, albeit set in contemporary times, it is more concerned with Germany now that the wall has come down, with racism and old Nazi secrets, and with the creative process in filmmaking and how it can become corrupted.

There are wonderfully evocative scenes, much drama, some humor, and a fascinating exploration of how relationships form and can disintegrate, mostly by certain parties not paying attention to what's going on around them (which

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echoes the Arthurian story nicely) and by how the past doesn't go away, but actually increases its malevolent influence the longer we refuse to deal with it.

And is Kubanicek really Merlin? By the time we get to the end of the book, it doesn't matter. The allegory plays out all the same.

Whenever a new Arthurian-based book comes on the market, I always find myself asking, "Does the world even need one more take on this material?" My opinion on this doesn't matter because, even as you read this, someone is out there writing one all the same. But this time, I'd have to say yes.

Over the River & Through the Woods, by Clifford D. Simak, Tachyon Publications, $25

Everyone has their own entry point into science fiction. For most people of my generation it seems to be the giants Heinlein, Asimov or Bradbury, all of whom still have a large number of books in print, welcoming in new legions of fans. I've liked work by all three men, but I came to sf primarily through the work of Andre Norton, Roger Zelazny, and Clifford D. Simak.

Of all these authors, Simak is the most neglected on the bookshelves of most bookstores — one of the lost greats in the same way that Morris, Dunsany, Cabell and their like are rarely to be found except in better-stocked public libraries and the private collections of readers who realize that their work is not only of historic importance, but still continues to provide wonderful reading experiences.

Simak's writing really doesn't age at all and the stories collected here in *Over the River & Through the Woods* are ample proof of that. Barring "Good Night, Mr. James," which doesn't work for me at all (it tries too hard), these stories could have been written today instead of in the fifties, for the clarity and directness of Simak's prose is timeless. The honest, salt-of-the-earth voices of "A Death in the House," "The Big Front-Yard" and "Neighbor" — each chronicling an encounter between a crusty rural-dweller and something inexplicable — can still be heard in America; the stories remain relevant. The humor of "Dusty Zebras" doesn't age. And "The Grotto of the Dancing Deer" (the newest story in the collection, having first appeared in *Analog* in 1980) is still one of the best takes on immortality I've yet to read.

Yes, there aren't any representations from Simak's classic City in

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here, but Tachyon Publications are still to be commended for putting Simak back in the bookstores and they deserve our support. For ordering information, contact them at 1459 18th Street #139, San Francisco, CA 94107.

The Golden Compass, by Philip Pullman, Knopf, $20

There's much good to be found in Philip Pullman's latest novel, originally published last year in Britain under the title *Northern Lights*. The plot rollicks along at brisk clip and it has a wonderfully realized setting: Oxford in the 19th century, but in another world, like ours and yet unlike. As its young heroine, Lyra Belacqua, a wild child raised by scholars, travels from Oxford to London, into the fenlands and then north through Scandinavia, half the fun is separating the bits of our world from those the author has made up.

Gyptians (Gypsies), witches, a Texan balloonist and the like contrast nicely with less familiar creatures like the armored bears of the frozen north, and Pullman proves delightfully inventive with elements such as his alethiometer, a kind of mechanical Tarot (the "compass" of the title), and the shape-changing animal companions every human being has that come across as something between a pet and a witch's familiar.

But for all its positive aspects, *The Golden Compass* falls prey to the same problem besetting too many fantasy novels that have appeared since Tolkien inadvertently invented the fantasy genre in the fifties: There is no closure because the book is only the first part of a trilogy. After four hundred pages, the plot simply peters out and the author expects readers to wait at least two more years to have the whole story in hand.

Fantasy and sf are the only genres that charge their readers three times the cover price of a regular book to give them a compete story because...well, that's how Tolkien did it, the irony being that *The Lord of the Rings* wasn't written as a trilogy, but arbitrarily broken up into three books by its publisher. There's nothing wrong with a series, or with continuing a theme

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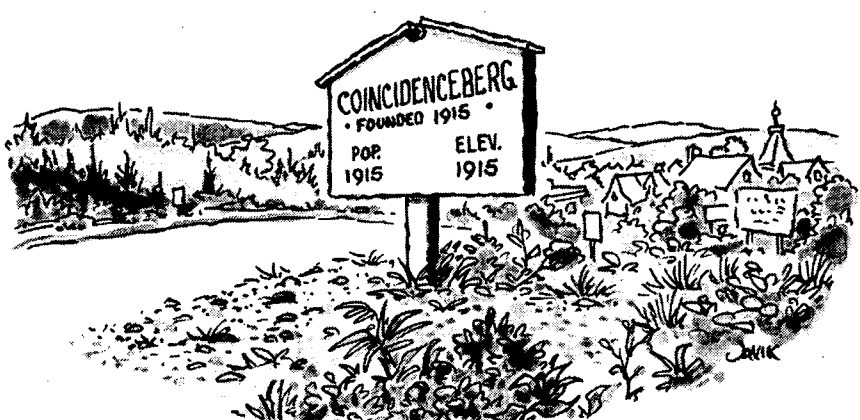
from one book to another, but the author should at least play fair with his readers. *The Golden Compass* doesn't do so, continuing the unfortunate trend.

More problematic is the lack of character depth. Its heroine, through all her many adventures, is the same girl at the end as she was when the book began, and none of the characters have any real motivation. Villains are villainous because that's how they are. Lyra is helped along her way because it furthers the plot. In fact everything in the novel is event-driven and readers are robbed of one of the great pleasures of a good book, which is to gain some insight, however vicariously, into who we are, how we came to be that way, and why we do the things that we do.

All of which is a pity because Pullman's prose is quite lovely and he's obviously put a lot of consideration into his setting and background, the fascinating history of this alternate world and the various creatures populating it.

But with under-realized characters to carry the story, even if he had taken us to the end of the plot, we would still be left with an incomplete book.

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P.O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.



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Brief Reviews: Books

Treasure Box, by Orson Scott Card, HarperCollins, $24.00

IT'S NO great secret that we like former columnist Orson Scott Card (and his work) here at *F&SF*. Some of us have followed his career since its inception: we liked him as a writer of science fiction; we liked him when he grew to write the Alvin Maker books, with their strange and wonderful mix of fantasy, folklore, and alternate history; and now, when he's grown to write something distinctly darker, we like him very much indeed.

Treasure Box is a wonderfully eerie ghostly gothic twisted around upon itself, rather like a Barbie doll with its head turned backward. It opens with Jane Austen-esque biographical discursion — but where we expect Austen's biography of a young woman, we find ourselves following the life of a haunted and haunting young man. His problems are the problems we turn to gothics and romance to probe: romance, our place in the world, and even ennui (yes, ennui, and it's a testament to Scott's gift that he can write such a page-turner about a man in the throes of ennui). But our hero's problems don't take the form that they would if he were a romance heroine. Quentin Fears is a guy, and a very guy-ish guy indeed; to see all that maleness stretched out across the gothic frame we know so well from reading romance novels strikes us at once peculiarly, delightfully, and to the point of captivation.

But what else are we to expect from Orson Scott Card? And make no mistake, *Treasure Box* is a Scott Card novel. The man who wrote *Ender's Game* is *sui generis*; when he writes a book, the fact that he's written it stamps the text more deeply than any form could ever stamp it.

The Virgin and the Dinosaur, R. Garcia y Robertson, AvoNova, $5.99

Jake Bento is an augmented operative for FTL, a corporation with a lock on time travel. The

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book opens with Jake guiding the beautiful paleontologist Peg on a tour of the Mesozoic. The dinosaurs are nicely described and the action is exciting. In spite of being mostly befuddled by his hormones, Jake performs heroically, and after many adventures, they head home with enough goodies on the era to make them rich and famous.

In order to get to and from the Mesozoic, you have to make some stops along the way. Peg and Jake spend time with Sitting Bull. They take a riverboat to New Orleans and contend with hooligans, gamblers, and racists. At the end of the line, they zip back home through the Bermuda Triangle and into corporate intrigue. Not everyone in the company has their best interests in mind.

Jake's home time is interesting. FTL technology means people can go pretty much anywhere very quickly (Jake lives on Mars), but that can also be a problem. What if too many people want to go to the same place at the same time?

Jake and Peg hassle with the higher-ups and finally manage to put together another expedition to the Mesozoic where everything comes together in some spectacular dinosaur scenes.

Encounter with Tiber, by Buzz Aldrin & John Barnes, Warner, $21.95

A radio signal from Alpha Centauri reveals that Earth was visited 9,000 years ago by aliens fleeing the destruction of their homeworld. What's more, a vast encyclopedia of alien knowledge was sent afterward to help the colonists in building their Earth base. The aliens died out millennia ago, but the encyclopedia still waits — on the south pole of the Moon. If humanity wants it, they'll have to go get it.

Encounter is much more than the story of a rekindled space race. It's a captivating story of alien explorers also racing against the clock, and against their own all-too-human nature, to preserve their society from extinction.

Nor is this just another ghost-written celebrity book. Aldrin and Barnes worked together on this project for over a year, and the result is a masterful blending of talent and experience. *Encounter* doesn't read like either Aldrin or Barnes alone, but like a brand new — and very welcome — voice in the science fiction field.

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Otherwere, edited by Laura Anne Gilman and Keith R.A. DeCandido, Ace, $5.99

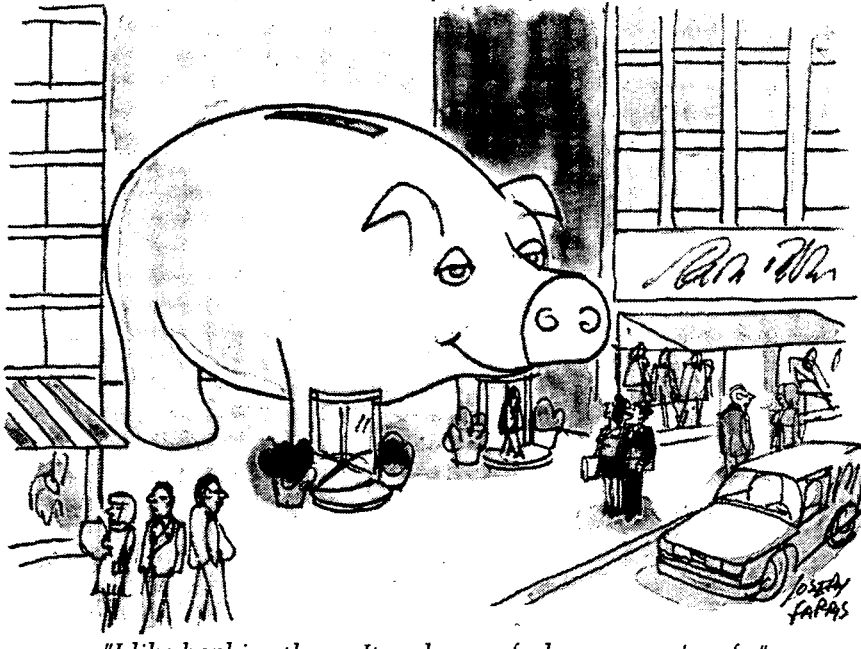
The premise for this collection of stories is simple: each one is about a were-creature other than a wolf, though Peter David's interesting story, "Moonlight Becomes You," cheats a little.

So we have were-fish, a were-elephant, a were-snake, even a were-Republican.

The only problem with this idea is once the reader discovers who in the story is were and what it is he/she turns into, too often there's not much story left.

Julia Ecklar's "Thylacine Dream" has an interesting evolutionary premise. Adam-Troy Castro's "The Way Things Ought to Be" (about the were-Republican) is sad and sobering. Shariann Lewitt's "Sharewere" introduces a computer to the equation, and Esther M. Friesner's "The Strange Case of Ludwig the Unspeakable" is a spectacularly loony homage to Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories.

Still, one is left with the feeling that More Could Be Done with this idea.



"I like banking there. It makes me feel my money's safe."

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Carroll Brown made his first short story sale to F&SF *("The Borderlands," published in December 1995). He returns with a stunning fantasy story.*

About the story, he writes, "Like a lot of sf/f fans, I grew up on King Arthur and had several ideas for stories about him floating around in my head for years. This is not the one I would have predicted I'd write, but in watching the news and reading the paper, it makes you realize how different a place the world is now than it must have been 'then' in the days of glory. And then you think again and realize it probably wasn't any different at all."

The King of Seventh Avenue

By Carroll Brown

"HAIL, ARTHUR, KING OF the Britons."

He set down his rag and extended his hand as I approached. "Max," he said, "good to see you again. You haven't been around much lately."

"You know me," I said jovially.

"Yes, I do," he answered. "Where was it this time? Middle East? China?"

"Oh, here and there, you know." I waved the question off in seeming modesty, but I don't think it fooled him.

After a moment he nodded his head and said again, "Yes, I know," but he let it drop.

I followed him inside, out of the New York summer and into the mechanical winter of an overworked air conditioner. A faint odor of freon hung in the air, or what I think freon would smell like if it had an odor; sharp, metallic, like the inside of a refrigerator. Arthur always kept the store cold in the summer. He claimed it was good for the produce, kept it

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from wilting so fast under the weight of the sodden air, but those few of us who had known him for some time remembered how it had taken years of summer's crushing heat before he had finally begun wearing short-sleeved shirts. Even now he wouldn't wear short pants, in public or private. He wasn't, he explained, a "shorts" kind of person.

I followed him toward the back of the store, occupying myself with my thoughts as he stopped several times to wait on customers before he finally ducked behind a pile of bananas nearly as tall as himself, though half that height was the stand the pile sat on and half its volume, I knew, was a carefully concealed cardboard box. "The illusion of prosperity breeds prosperity," he had solemnly explained when I had first gasped in mock outrage at this deception, and apparently he knew what he was talking about. The store was bigger each time I returned.

He tossed me a banana and watched me with a small smile as I ate it.

"You're looking good," he finally said.

"So are you," I responded, and at least I wasn't lying. I knew how my appearance had changed in the more than a year gone by. The lost hair. The heavy line of scar tissue running below my left ear almost to my collarbone that was still startling pink and fresh looking against my perpetually sunburnt neck. The thinness of my face and hands. And subtler things. Shadows in my eyes, Sandra had called them, just before she left me.

Arthur looked the same. He always did.

I'd known him on and off for twelve or more years, casually, which I gathered was as well as anyone knew him. Whenever I came back to the neighborhood we would sit down, have a drink, talk politics or religion or just shoot the breeze for an evening. The kind of conversation that made you wonder why you didn't have more conversations like that, the ones that left you emotionally and intellectually satisfied and entertained, the kind it looks like they're having on beer commercials.

And then for the next week I'd pass him at the store, and he'd wave, nod hello, keep waiting on his customers. And then it would be time for me to go again, back out on assignment, wherever the news was, or at least the photogenic news. The wars.

I think he appreciated my disbelief, that it allowed him a certain degree of anonymity that he could never really achieve with most other people.

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When my friend Jill had introduced us (Jesus, where was she now? Happy? Still alive?), she had looked eagerly at me as she said, "Max, meet King Arthur."

He certainly looked the part. I have few pretensions about my physical machismo, but he had the kind of imposing stature and overwhelming solidity that psychologically crippled lesser men. Not exceptionally tall but remarkably broad, solid looking. Blond hair that fell in a shag cut to his shoulders and a beard a complementary darker shade of blond, almost brown. He moved with what I suddenly understood the cliché "supple grace" to mean; under his rugby shirt, I saw the muscles bunch and crowd together in the simple act of Arthur wiping the water and bits of fruit pulp off his hand before offering it; his arms, upper and lower, were the corded cables of a man who had spent his life lifting things. But his smile was as warm and modest as his grip.

"Hail, Arthur, King of the Britons," I had said, grinning.

"And well met," Arthur grinned back.

"No, really, I mean it," Jill had insisted. "This is *the* King Arthur!"

"No. I *was* the King Arthur." He shrugged. "Now I'm just Arthur. A pleasure to meet you, Max."

I didn't recall imparting my name yet, and I told him so. "Magic?" I asked.

"Ah, no! That would be Merlin's department. He runs a shoe store up in the Garment District." He laughed and winked, ignoring Jill's foot stamping as he nodded toward her. "She told me she'd be bringing you by today."

"I thought you two would get along," Jill said, and added with a humph, "but I didn't think you'd get along this well."

We laughed for a while more, still mostly at Jill's expense, and Arthur apologized to her as we left, offering her a tangerine in recompense. Later, in my apartment, she continued to insist that this local grocer was the once and future king.

"You ask anybody on that street, in this whole neighborhood," she said. "They'll all tell you."

"Truth is not a majority rules situation," I said. "I would ask every one of them, and I'm asking you, the same thing I say to people who claim UFOs land in deserted cornfields in the Midwest: Why? Why fly hundreds

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of light years to spook some dairy farmer whom nobody's going to believe? Huh? Why would King Arthur be selling produce in New York City?"

The argument momentarily stalled her, longer than it did the usual crackpot but only because she knew me, and knew that arguments of faith, of mere belief, wouldn't hold any sway.

"But you'll notice," she finally said, "that he never denied it."

And he hadn't. He had joked, he had deflected with sarcasm, he had changed the subject, but he had never said anything, explicitly or implicitly, that refuted Jill's, and the neighborhood's, claim. That he was King Arthur.

He stared at me from the backdrop of bananas, waiting on my silence.

But, "You look tired," he finally said, then laughed. "Good, I mean, but tired. How long are you back for?"

"I don't know," I answered. Until I figure out why I came back in the first place. Until the shadows go away.

What is it that draws us back to places, into the rituals of our past even when there is no more reason for it, when the people who had moored us to that shore have gone and we're left adrift, without anything tying us to anywhere anymore? My parents passed away now, several years ago and within two months of each other; Sandra left so completely that I no longer even knew which coast she was on, or where between them; Carl dead, too, at the hands of some drunk driver; one by one the lines severed, snapping away in sudden whiplashes of pain and crackling air.

Memories, I suppose, is the only answer. As clear and artificial as fishing line, and as strong, binding us with invisible wires, so that even when we want to push off from that shore, set out for somewhere new, just run and hide, we find ourselves inexorably drawn back to the familiar shore and the familiar tracks that we have worn in its sands, grooves scratched so deep by our repetitious passing that now, even if we want, we cannot jump out of them any more easily than a train can jump its tracks; it can be done, but the price is destruction.

Why did I come back here? I honestly didn't know, and the lack of reason nagged at me, one more piece taken away from inside of me, or one more piece added to the growing void; it came to the same thing. Perhaps it was precisely for that familiar shore; if not peopled by loved ones, then at least not by total strangers, and the comfort of surrendering to the

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carved out path. I didn't know if that was the answer, but it was an acceptable enough one for now, and I carried it with me gently as I walked to Clyde 9's, the tavern on Ninth Avenue.

It was, in many ways, a changed place; larger, more open. Clyde had knocked out most of the two exterior walls that formed the corner facing the streets and replaced them with windows. The lighting inside was brighter as well, but I couldn't tell if it was a trick of illumination combined with the illusion of boundlessness engendered by the new windows or if perhaps Clyde had knocked out an interior wall as well: the place felt bigger, a single open room. But the old wooden bar still ran along one side of the room, chocolate-colored wood chipped and worn over the years into a strange abstract sculpture. I didn't recognize the man behind it.

Arthur sat at a small round table just below the bar; there was no symbolism in the act, all the tables in Clyde's are round. He was smiling at me as I entered the door, and had a beer waiting for me, sweating quietly onto the tabletop opposite him.

Around him were people I had known here, grown up with in this neighborhood, friends, acquaintances, faces I did not know, gathered together. The group was large and dispersed, and it wasn't clear to me if they had come together here for me and were awaiting my arrival, or if it was mere chance that on this night so many people familiar to me were in this one place at this one time, or perhaps something in between. There was no sudden shout of greeting, no huzzah of warm recognition as I came and sat across from Arthur, but rather a slow ripple through the crowd as one by one they noticed my presence and came over to greet me, inquire about me, welcome me home. Arthur lounged in the chair opposite me, his feet stretched out and his fingers curled together loosely on his stomach, beaming.

"How did you know?" I said.

He shrugged, still smiling. "Tradition," he said. "We always come here the night you come back. Just because neither one of us mentioned it doesn't mean it wasn't going to happen." He raised his glass and touched it to the bottle I held; they met with a small piercing clink. "To traditions," he said, "and homecomings."

I took a long pull at the bottle, upending it into my lips and letting it drain in foamy hiccups into my throat. Arthur said nothing as I set the

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empty bottle on the table and ordered another, and I appreciated that. I knew it was a mistake, that you can't drown the kind of dark fires that I was carrying inside me, that they simply rise to the top like oil and burn closer to the surface, but I did it anyway.

"So how come you didn't tell us you were coming back?" Mark Novacek twisted on his stool at the bar, joining our small circle with a twist of his seat, and beside him Stan Martins did the same. Both were big men, and the long slender legs of the barstools looked precarious beneath them, as though they might snap at any moment and send them flying down into us. Mark's voice bellowed at close range, his natural boisterousness amplified by the alcohol that glowed in the veins of his face.

"Didn't know I was," I said. "Just kind of decided, at the last minute. Needed a vacation, you know?" I shrugged, smiling wanly.

"You still at the *Times* international desk?" Stan asked. Unlike Mark, Stan's physical size was mitigated by the soft tenor of his voice, and I had to lean in toward him, asking him to repeat the question, when I saw his lips moving, his eyes in my direction. "You still — " he held his hands up, forefingers raised, one of them clicking down with a quick motion in the international pantomime for taking a photograph.

"No, yes," I answered when I'd understood. "Yes, I'm still in photojournalism. No, I left the *Times*. I'm at Reuters now. Same thing, different boss."

"I hear that!" Mark said. We raised our bottles to it. Any port in a storm.

In a surprisingly short amount of time an inverted forest of brown glass grew up from our tabletop, long thin bottlenecks sticking up. Not all were ours; some were Mark and Stan's, swivelling back and forth between the bar and our table, from conversation to conversation. Some belonged to more itinerant conversationalists, people who knew me or Arthur or both, who stopped by for a moment to pay their respects, engage us in brief discussion before patting me on the shoulder and passing away into the crowd; leaving, if they'd happened to finish it at this station of the cross, their empty bottle like an offering or a memento.

But most of them were mine.

"I hope you don't mind all this..." Arthur waved his hand at the crowd, as though they were all here on my behalf, a celebration for me. Or

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a wake. "Earlier today you had a look in your eyes. The look of a man who needs his friends about him." He drained his bottle, his contribution to the table far outweighed by my own. "I've seen that look before."

"I appreciate it," I said. "I mean, I do, but it just...makes me a little uncomfortable, you know. That's why I work on the side of the camera that I work on. I'm not big on being in the spotlight."

"They're just worried about you, and glad that you're okay," he said. "You live a dangerous life."

"Nah. I just take pictures of other people leading dangerous lives."

"Can I assume, then, that you got that — " he pointed to the pink line running down my neck, "in a tragic darkroom accident?"

I touched the scar, running my finger down the ridge of hard skin. "Close," I answered. "Car accident. Coming home from a bar in London after having had just enough to drink to forget which side of the road I was supposed to be on."

"So you've been covering the war in England?" Mark asked. I hadn't realized he was listening, wouldn't have brought it up if I'd known. I glanced at Arthur, but he was looking away, into the crowd as though he'd spotted someone and was following their movement.

"Yep!" I said finally. "England, Zaire, Tibet, Tajikhistan. You name it, if there's a war there, I've covered it."

"Wow." He shook his head in wonderment. "That must be really exciting."

"Yeah," I answered. "Listen, will you excuse me a minute? I gotta get rid of some of this." I pointed at the bottles, winking and slapping him hard on the shoulder as I passed by. I felt Arthur's eyes on me as I left, I thought, or a weight like that of a stare, but when I glanced back toward the table as I retreated down the hall leading to the restroom, Arthur was turned toward a woman standing beside the table, talking with the same easy conviction he always had.

I slipped into one of the stalls, pulling the door quietly shut behind me and throwing its latch. I hung for a moment from its top, sagging, and was surprised to find myself sweating, a thin sheen that gathered at my hairline and slowly rolled down my forehead in a steady wave. I tried to breathe deeply for several seconds, calming myself, waiting to feel the slow rush of nausea, but my stomach was fine, only tender from overfill-

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ing, and I undid the top button on my pants, easing some of the pressure on it, as I sat, clothed, on the stool.

If I wasn't sick, why was my head buzzing, spinning? No, churning; a greater chaos than simple alcoholic haze, a white noise building at the base of my skull and writhing its way through the neural paths of my mind. My head in my hands, I could feel the vibration of it on my palms, like electricity. I wanted to cry.

I gulped air, swallowing the sobs before they escaped and setting my hand against the stool's base for a moment, absorbing its cool moisture before pushing my fingers over my forehead and through my hair. The shadows, Sandra had called them, and she was right; the room narrowed around me, my vision darkening at the periphery, breaking up even in the harsh light of the restroom's overhead fluorescent bulbs. I stared straight ahead, as I always did when this happened, focusing my gaze on the lengthening tunnel of light directly ahead of me, refusing to look into the darkness gathering at the edges, not wanting to see what lived in there, what sad creatures the shadows were home to. With each passing year, each assignment, they had grown deeper and more populous, but I was no longer certain of the relative movement, if they were advancing on me or if I was pushing further into their realm.

Finally, after several minutes, it passed, the shadows dispersing in jagged fragments as my heart slowed, the quaking in my hands subsided. I stepped out of the stall, splashing my face briefly with cold water, washing away the thick oil of sweat and cooling the flush of my face. I dabbed the water away with the rough paper towels provided, watching my face in the mirror and marveling as always that they insisted on using fluorescent lighting in bathrooms, its blue radiance making me look pale and sickly; I hoped it was the lighting. On my neck, the scar glowed bright pink.

In the bar, our table had disappeared beneath a press of people, an audience gathered in convivial hunger around Arthur; over the hush of the group I could hear his voice rising, though I couldn't see him. He was speaking in what he called his "storyteller's voice," a soothing bass spoken in almost a whisper, rising and falling as though following some otherworldly melody, singing his story to the crowd as one sings a bedtime story to a child in that same tone: comforting, unthreatening, lulling.

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I'd heard this voice before, had listened in the past as Arthur had entertained friends and strangers with the stories and strange songs of, well, Arthurian Britain, his past or his namesake, take your pick. Why is it that after a millennium and a half we're still suckers for this; knights in armor, feats of derring do, noble lords and ladies, bittersweet victories? Do we take that much pleasure in deluding ourselves? This wasn't the real world, not now and not then. I'd confronted him once on it, thrown in his face the simple, devastating fact that our conception of Arthur's Britain, the stories he was telling, had no bearing on reality: knights didn't wear metal plate armor then, mostly leather. There was no evidence that England was united under a single king or even warlord at that point, not even in order to fight the Germanic invaders. There were no dragons, no giants, no glorious battles, not the way we think of it. Armies were small, battles brief and bloody and fought on foot. Tournament jousting wasn't even invented until the thirteenth century. So how could he tell these stories to people who were so obviously eager to believe what he said as gospel?

"Have you ever eaten an Italian pizza?" he answered me cryptically, but went on, saving me from cries of "evasion." "Italian pizzas, real Italian pizzas, are nothing like American pizzas. They don't use tomato sauce. They're just the dough, and a lot of olive oil, swimming in olive oil, and then some toppings — sausage, a little cheese, maybe even a little diced tomato. Then they're flash baked in a brick oven, the olive oil just heats up and cooks it all like that!" he snapped his fingers. "They're great, but you can't get them outside of Italy. I've tried. Hell, I even tried in authentic immigrant restaurants, in London, here in Little Italy, you name it. You order a pizza, even in one of those places, and it's still cheese and tomato sauce, maybe a little olive oil for flavor. I asked someone one time how come they don't make real Italian pizzas, and she said 'Because nobody over here likes them. When they order Italian pizza, this is what they want.' See, if you're not Italian, all that olive oil can be hard to take. And the taste of it; well, it takes some getting used to. It's not what you were expecting."

"Like the bananas," I said. "It's all just illusions. You're just giving them what they want to hear."

"Illusion has its purposes," he replied.

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And he had gone on telling his stories, even in front of me, letting the people think they were getting the real thing, what it was really like, sometimes winking at me as he spun his tales, acknowledging that I alone of them all was in on the joke.

But tonight was a story I'd never heard before, and for a moment a thrill ran through me. Even though I must have missed the beginning, I thought I recognized the action, what it had to be; a true story, maybe, one I don't think he'd ever told before. The story of his return.

"I rose up, off the stone," he was saying, and I thought, what stone? How did you first wake up, where had you been and where were you before that? What did I miss? I wanted to interrupt, to catch up, but I stayed silent in the back of the crowd, just listened. "It was hard, too hard, I felt like old stone myself. It would have been so much easier to lie there in the darkness. But I rose up, and put my feet on the floor. And I began to walk. Where? I had no idea. Who knows what magic woke with me, to guide me to my destiny? I walked in darkness and I raised my hands and they touched a door. Magic, it must have been. A door, a stone door. I could feel its seams beneath my fingers. I pushed; I strained. Magic or no, the doors were still heavy stone, and I screamed as I pushed, with the effort, with the desire. And the doors opened.

"Light. Pale light, it must have been, because it was dawn, but it flooded across me like a sea in the desert. Green grass. Blue sky. Glory.

"I walked some more. What else could I do? I was naked, lost, confused; whatever geas impelled me earlier, it had left me when I left my stone womb, and now, reborn, I was alone. I walked. Until I came upon the most amazing thing I'd ever seen.

"A river. Frozen, though the air on my skin felt like a summer morning. I knew, indeed, that this was a magical world, if rivers froze in summer. And it was black, dark as midnight, yes, dark as the cave. I touched it, with a finger, then with a toe. Solid, indeed. I stepped out onto its surface, marveling at this miracle ..."

He stopped, and suddenly I could see it, in my mind's eye, could imagine his sly face, the little grin dancing at the ends of his mouth, fighting to hold it in for one more beat as he took in the faces of the hushed crowd. Setting them up. I understood the story; I was in on the joke. I moaned inwardly, disappointed, angry.

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"...and almost got creamed by a Jaguar doing seventy-five," he finished. There was silence for a moment, the crowd taking time to realize they'd been had, it was all a bad joke, it wasn't truth at all, no revelation or epiphany. They laughed loudly then, continued chuckling as they began to disperse back to their private domains, shaking their heads and chortling at their own gullibility and Arthur's skill.

"The Matter of Britain," I said suddenly, very loudly. Rivulets of sweat dripped down my cheeks. "Isn't that what they're called, stories about King Arthur: the Matter of Britain? I have a story for you."

The crowd had stopped, turning toward me in a silence somewhere between curiosity and embarrassment; without even a cough to stir the air it suddenly felt cold in the room; not the heat I would have expected, the sudden stifling stillness of the crowd-heated air adding cumulatively to the growing glow of my own face, neck, even my hands radiating drunken humiliation and anger at the low tide of simpering, smiling, indulgent faces around me. No, the room went suddenly very cool, the crystal stillness of winter, of frost, of death and leaving, bloodless and shocked. The faces staring at me.

"Once upon a time," I said. I did my best to imitate Arthur's soothing baritone, but my voice broke, wavered; I went on anyway. "Once upon a time England was at war. The Welsh were fighting the English and the Scots were fighting the English and of course the Irish were fighting the English. Sometimes, even the English were fighting the English. Just like when the Romans pulled out of Britain, and everybody jumped on everybody else. And just like every war for the last three hundred years, it seemed there were as many journalists there as soldiers. And, of course, photographers, because thanks to Mathew Brady the people back home just don't believe it's a war if they don't get to see the pictures for themselves.

"So there were all these journalists at the war, with their notepads and their cameras, and the soldiers with their guns and their hand grenades. And one day a group of journalists went out with a patrol, their pool got called up and off they went in an APC with a group of soldiers whose sergeant was twenty-two years old. They were patrolling near Carlisle, in northwest England, in an area where the English had been taking heavy losses in a Scottish National Liberation Party offensive, and it doesn't

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matter whose side this patrol was on because unless you were a soldier you couldn't tell the difference anyway. Half the time it was militias from the same neighborhoods fighting each other.

"This patrol was cruising a country lane, one of those old sunken roads that have been there since the Romans, so sunken it's almost a tunnel. And suddenly up ahead they spotted a car. Not an APC, not any kind of armament — an automobile. A Peugeot, a white station wagon. Everybody knows civilian cars aren't on the roads anymore, there's not enough gas and it's too dangerous, too many mines, for pleasure driving. So the soldiers stepped on it, the APC started really rumbling down this lane like a bobsled, riding high up on curves as it tried to follow this winding lane. And the Peugeot started speeding up, too; it knew these soldiers were behind it. But it was just no match. The APC didn't even have to overtake it; when it got close enough it just opened up with its mounted guns.

"The journalists were all loving this. This was serious shit, real danger and excitement but on a small enough scale to be understood by folks back home. Real Sunday Supplement material.

"The station wagon rolled up the embankment, flipped in a cloud of dust and burning oil. By the time the soldiers in the APC got up there, all the people inside had crawled out. One man was crawling along the road in the dirt, dragging himself; his knee bent almost ninety degrees in the wrong direction and both of his eyes already swollen shut, his face was purple under the blood. The other people weren't hurt as bad. Two other men, surly men that looked almost middle-aged, which meant they were probably twenty-eight or twenty-nine. Dark hair, dark jackets, glaring at the soldiers with a look that told you straight off they were enemy militia. But behind them they were shielding two young women, and the women were scared for real, so scared that neither one of them was making a sound. One of the girls had two kids with her, one maybe six was holding her hand and looking bored like this sort of thing happened to him and Mom all the time. The other one was a toddler, a big roly-poly boy so bundled up he looked almost spherical, and that one was screaming his lungs out.

"The soldiers and the journalists hopped down off the carrier and started forward; the soldiers' guns just slung over their arms casually. They stopped, looking at this motley group, maybe trying to decide what

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to do. The one man, the hurt one, was still crawling, obviously not seeing where he was going because he crawled right onto the boot of the soldier out in front, who looked down like a slug has just crawled across him. Without even raising his gun from where it was slung he pulled the trigger, just for a second, and about twenty rounds of ammunition spiked the guy to the ground. He writhed around for a second, then stopped. Meanwhile, we're still standing off to the side taking pictures and writing all this down.

"The sergeant whistles at the others then and says something in this thick northern accent and the rest of them come forward, some gathering around the women and children and the rest separating off the two men, bullying them up the road a little bit. The two men seem to be trying to explain themselves, explain what they were doing out on the road, who they are. I couldn't tell if the guards were listening at all because I was zoomed in tight, all the way so that all I could see in the viewfinder was the muzzle of a gun as it kept butting gently into one of the men's stomach, prodding him.

"And then they just shot them.

"I was blind for a second, because I'd been tight on the muzzle when it erupted. Behind me the women started screaming finally, shrieking and trying to push away the guards. I turned toward them, blinking, my right eye was watering badly, so I was standing there blinking as the girls fought and pushed, though I couldn't tell if they were trying to get to the two dead men or just get away. One, the youngest one, broke away but didn't get two steps before they shot her in the back, and at the same time opening up on the other woman and the baby she was holding. She just crumpled, fell straight down with the baby underneath her. Still screaming, a bundle of bloody rags trapped under its dead mother. One of the soldiers walked over to it and stomped on it, once, hard, and then it was quiet.

"The other little boy still stood in the middle of the road, all these bodies around him, his hands by his sides. It suddenly seemed to hit him, all of it, and his face screwed up then, his eyes getting big and his mouth opening, but before he could get anything out they shot him in the face. He went down right next to his mother.

"I got it all on film. Seven people dead. It took me a minute to realize that the whining was my camera motor, frame after frame of the

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dead still clicking off, rolling forward, making room for the next shot. I was prepared to fight for it, swallow the film, whatever it took to hold onto my pictures. They never even asked me about it. When I got back to the lab I was sweating, shaking, I kept spilling chemicals and pulling the film off the loops. I could smell awards on that film, front pages across the world. Maybe, after the war, a photographic retrospective.

"When the first photo developed, I threw up. Each one came up, the images materializing, more horrible than the last. I walked out of the lab, just left them in their pans of chemicals, and got out of there. Got the first flight back here, back home."

I stopped then, drawing myself up and looking up finally. They all still stood there, waiting, listening, some with hands to their mouths, some with heads down, some whispering to friends and laughing quietly until they saw my gaze on them. I couldn't see Arthur, still seated below the level of the crowd. I felt an effusive dampness on my face, and hoped sincerely that it was merely sweat, that I had not wept in front of this room full of strangers.

"Home to what?" I said. "To a bunch of people wanting to hear stories about England, and war. That's the Matter of Britain."

I spat, a sudden action like the striking of a snake, and the splash of its impact on the floor in the still quiet room was loud, grotesque. People jumped back, moving finally for the first time since I'd started speaking. I don't know why I did it; certainly these people didn't deserve the despite of that act. Most of them I barely knew at all, they should have engendered nothing more than my indifference. It was, in its way, the cruelest act of my life.

Arthur stood up then, rising from the middle of the dense pack of people. They parted before him, giving him easier access to me,and I hung my head like a schoolboy, but my cheeks retained their icy tone. He laid his hand on my shoulder, waiting as I refused to look into his face, and then embraced me.

"I think you need a place to stay tonight," he said softly. "I think you need to sleep this off."

I wept into his shoulder.

* * *

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His home was unexpected in its normalcy. Like every other apartment you might walk into in New York: a couch and easy chair squared around a coffee table, close by a dinette set as the living room backed up into the dining area. A couple of bookcases filled with paperbacks and a few knickknacks to break up the spacing. A stereo. A photograph of JFK hung on one wall, looked like maybe a campaign glossy, but when I got closer I noticed someone had drawn a mustache and blacked out some teeth with a pen.

"Do you want a b — " He stopped, considering me, then shook his head and went into the kitchen, returning with two tall glasses of iced tea.

"Thanks," I said. I held the glass against my forehead, but didn't drink any. I made a show of looking around. "Nice place."

He shrugged, "It's not Camelot, but it works for me. A lot less drafty, too. Hey, you want to see something?" He turned without waiting for an answer and headed off down the hall. I wasn't sure if it was something he was going to bring out, or if I was supposed to follow, but when he didn't return I assumed the latter, and followed cautiously where he'd gone. Something inside of me was afraid; I don't know if it was the alcohol, or the lack of sleep, or probably something deeper and more remote, but the shadows in this place frightened me. At every step I expected something to jump out at me.

But it was just a hallway, with a bedroom at the end, and Arthur stood next to one wall, beside a hamper full of dirty clothes.

A sword hung on the wall, framed by a plain, heavy wooden box, backed in green velvet. Two thick metal pins supported it beneath the cross guards, and two more where the blade began its sharp taper toward a rounded point.

"Excalibur," he said.

I stared. It was large, fully four and a half feet long at least. Silver wire wrapped in a tight spiral around the grip; the rest of the hilt was gold, from the pommel down to the tips of the guards. Only two stones were set in it, an emerald in the flat center of the pommel as large as my thumbnail, and in the center of the guard, and centered above the blade below, a single deep ruby. Small, almost delicate, and all the more powerful for its singularity amongst the gold.

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The blade, mirror polished, flowed like quicksilver in a straight line until, perhaps two inches from its point, it swung inward. The edges glinted sparks in the lamplight.

"Franklin Mint," Arthur said. "Cost me a fortune."

I turned on him. He was smiling at me, grinning, holding back laughter.

"It's not real?"

"Come on, Max. Even magical swords rust after fifteen hundred years!"

I turned toward him, looked at him, his broad smirking face, his lips pressed tight together under the bristling fall of his mustache, and I suddenly understood. Understood him, understood why I'd come back to this place, what enchantment had drawn me.

"You're him," I said, not a question. "You're really him."

He had puffed up when I'd turned, preparing to defend himself again as he had against me so many times, but instead he expelled the breath in a bursting laugh.

"What?" I asked.

"That's not what I expected you to say," he answered, shaking his head. He was still smiling, but the smile was different, melancholy.

"What, did you think I'd doubt you some more? I'm too tired for doubt. Doubt is a struggle, it takes effort."

"So you're just giving up on the truth?"

"No, didn't you hear me? I'm giving in to truth. I believe you now, I believe you're King Arthur and I believe that's Excalibur and I'll believe anything you tell me. It's the truth, it's all the truth."

"Now you're just humoring me," he said sadly.

"No," I insisted. "I believe. I want to believe." I've got to believe, or the shadows will never go away. "Save them," I said.

It burst out as a sob, half-strangled in my belated effort to swallow the words, stop them, devour them before they escaped. Arthur looked up at me suddenly, surprised, frightened. For a moment he looked as if he might dash out of the room, turn and leap from the window rather than stand before me. But he stayed, looking at me as though probing through me, and then he smiled again sadly and nodded, like he understood it all.

"You've seen some sad things, Max," he said finally. "But don't let it kill your hope. Things will get better."

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"Is that what you think this is about?" I felt a sudden hot gush of anger sprout inside me, and spun in an agitated circle, flinging my arms out. Tea sloshed on the carpet. "My hope?"

He nodded.

"Not mine! Not mine!" I yelled at him. "Theirs! Don't you get it? Don't you even understand it yourself? That's what you are: Hope. The hope that when things get bad, somebody'll come along to make it better. Well, they're bad, okay? They're fucking butchering each other over there, they're killing — " I tried to stop it again, but the sobs just came out, dragging tears with them, and they only seemed to make the fire in me hotter, the words ripping out of my throat and dredging chunks of flesh on the way up, leaving it raw and torn. " — they're killing babies and women and old men. It's not war! They're killing babies, for Christ's sake! That's not war, war's bad enough, but Jesus... And you're here, half a world away, selling fucking groceries!"

I flung the glass at the wall, at the sword hanging there, and it smashed against the steel, shattering into slivers that sprayed across Arthur. He stood without flinching, glaring at me; blood began flowing from a dozen minute cuts on his face, oozing slowly up like stigmata.

"You have no idea what you're talking about." He said it in an even tone, almost conversational, but the rippling of violence, a subsonic wave beneath his words, struck me like a force. I resisted the urge to drop to the floor, to sit on the bed, and stood my ground. "You don't know what I went through. They're just stories to you, myths. I lived them. I watched my friends die, one after another. I watched my wife...my son...I had to watch it all fall apart around me. They took my soul, Max. They left me with nothing. And I remember all of it, every damned minute. In the end, they didn't even let me just die and forget."

There are moments when a person's life opens before you, startled into fullness by something insignificant, something meaningless if it wasn't the key to everything; the way a man suddenly shouts at his aged mother for her forgetfulness, seeing in her decline his own impending loneliness, or the intemperate joy of the young couple, newly married, watching as a neighborhood child teaches herself to skate, laughing not at her falling, but at her rising, her persistent rising, seeing through her years down their own road, their own children in her unsteady unstoppable legs.

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For a brief second Arthur's gaze slipped to the floor, before snapping back up to mine. The flick of a gaze, nothing more, but for the first time, he wasn't flippant about the legend he had attached himself to, nor pedantic, nor even melodramatic. He was simply tired; fifteen hundred years of sleep cannot absolve a man of the exhaustion of the life he had led, had been forced to lead. He could not bear the weight of remembrance, and was afraid, desperately afraid that they would ask the same thing of him again. And that he would fail. Again.

"Don't you see," I said. "Don't you get it? That's the point. Even with all that, you're still there for them. That's what hope is all about."

"I can't do it," he said harshly, ducking his head. He turned away from me, toward window, drawing the curtain aside to stare out at the night. "Don't ask me to."

"I'm not asking you," I said. "It's not me that needs you."

"You son of a bitch!" He spun on me; his eyes brimmed and overflowed, but his voice was gravelled in pure anger. "Who are you to ask this of me? Who are you? You spend a little time among the dying and then you leave, you come back here and from the safety of a neighborhood bar you tell us how terrible it was over there, how the whole world has turned its back, how we all should be doing something. How I should be doing something."

The alcohol continued to percolate in my system, growing stronger instead of weakening. My knees began buckling, popping out from under me as fast as I could right myself, and I felt as though I were bobbing up and down, adrift at sea. I could feel the first green tinge of nausea spreading up my throat, and emotional recklessness floating on its surface as it rose.

"Don't expect me to feel sorry for you," I said. "You have the one thing we all want — destiny. You have a purpose, you may be the only person on the face of the planet who has a real, a knowable, purpose. Not some half-baked New Age psychobabble about finding your inner child. Something true. And you're turning your back on it. And on them."

My knees gave out for good and I toppled backward onto the bed in a sprawl. I struggled to right myself, hampered by my shirt that had twisted itself in a tight cord around my body.

Arthur stood above me, watching me squirm, jostling pathetically with my garments. He was silent, not really looking at me. I was afraid, suddenly; a light shone in his eyes, or maybe one had gone out. Whatever

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looked out at me from behind them was not something kind, or pleasant, or benign. I had a sudden fear that he would lean down over me, bend slowly over and place his hands around my throat and squeeze, as if he were testing the day's fruit shipment. And I remembered, with a kind of psychic clarity as if the pages of a book were opened in front of me, that Arthur had killed the babies of Britain. In the legend, he had drown them all, trying to destroy his son.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I know you probably want me to go. I'll just — " My hands kept slipping from beneath me when I put my weight on them, stranding me on the bed beneath him, under the weight of his gaze.

"Don't be stupid," he said finally. "You won't get very far in that condition. Besides, you're my guest. Where I come from, that sort of thing conveys responsibilities, one of which is, you never kick a guest out. No matter how obnoxious he is." He stepped toward the door, his hand on the light switch. "You take the bed. I'll sleep on the couch. If you're sick, you clean it up."

He shut the light off but hesitated in the doorway, silhouetted against the glow spilling down the hall from the living room, his outline fuzzy in the near-darkness. I gurgled my thanks and lay my head back, closing my eyes.

"You're wrong, though," he said, and it seemed to come from some place far off and fast slipping away as I drifted toward sleep. "It's not destiny. It's damnation."

He might have left then, but I was gone before he was.

THE NEXT MORNING the couch and the apartment were empty.

After two days, at the urging of his friends and employees, we called the police. I told them an edited version of the last time I'd seen him — that he'd let me sleep off my binge — but nothing of the conversation. No one asked what had hung in the empty frame on the bedroom wall, and I didn't volunteer the information.

About a year and a half later I went back to England, to cover the war again now that the tide had turned, and the English seemed to be holding their own. Everywhere I went I asked about him, sometimes by name, sometimes by description, sometimes by deed, and in every town and

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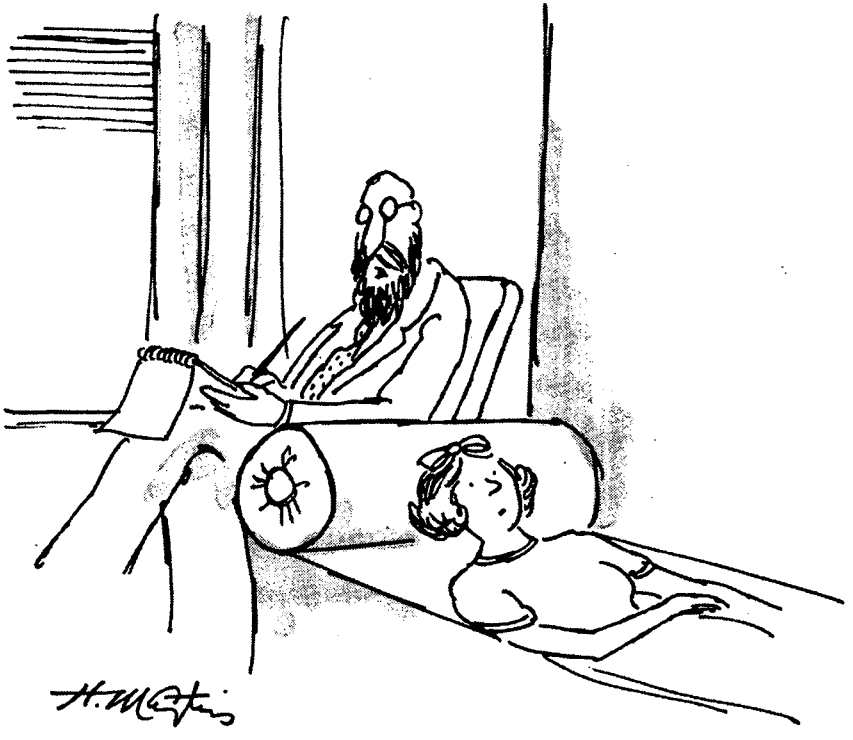
village, on every front and every battlefield, they had seen someone fitting that description. But he had disappeared in the fighting, or been killed and buried in a mass grave with all the others, and no one could ever tell me in which one, or which of the bodies was his.



"Now then, Ms. White, tell me about your relationship with these seven little men."

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Since his Star Wars novel, Shadows of the Empire, *hit the* New York Times *bestseller list last spring, Steve Perry has poublished two other novels:* The Trinity Vector, *and Leonard Nimoy's* Primortals. *His next novel is* The Digital Effect, *which Ace will publish sometime this year.*

With "What the Dormouse Said," Steve adds a bit of levity to the issue, especially for those of us who survived the 1960s.

"What the Dormouse Said"

By Steve Perry

PETER MORRISON AND Leon Hendricks were drinking eighty-buck-a-bottle brut champagne in Morrison's hot tub around midnight when something punched a hole in the sky over Beaverton.

The night was cold, but the heat rising from the water was enough to keep their ears from being nipped by December's frosty teeth. Morrison was trying to get Hendricks to feed him some insider information on the new microbrewery offering, hoping to get in on the ground floor. Hendricks was still half a bottle away from giving it up. Even over the Grateful Dead playing the Casey Jones cocaine song, they heard a sound kind of like a pencil poking through a sheet of Saran Wrap stretched over a bowl.

A real *big* pencil and a sheet of Saran Wrap maybe the size of, well, the midnight sky.

Both men looked up.

A bright, actinic, kind of...Maxfield Parrish light shined through the hole in the sky. After a second, a giant taloned finger poked through the

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hole, worried the sky fabric until it ripped a little more. Then a couple more fingers stretched the tear, until a whole hand made it halfway through. The hand, also a golden color, but more like pure, burnished 24-karat gold, pushed, and the sky gave way like soggy cardboard in a big, three-cornered tear. Made a hell of a racket.

Behind the space-time rent, a bald, golden gnome peered through the hole. It had big, purple eyes and an idiot grin. It only took a second for the thing to enlarge the hole enough to leap through.

Morrison figured the gnome must have been at least a couple hundred feet tall, though there wasn't really anything to judge it against up there.

The golden idiot fell. Before it disappeared from view behind the fir trees in the side yard they could see that it was naked — and most assuredly male.

After a moment, the ground shook. Water sloshed out of the hot tub. Morrison grabbed the champagne bottle and Hendricks quickly moved the CD player so it wouldn't get soaked. Five or six seconds later, there came a terrible *ka-boom!* as the sound of the creature landing arrived.

"Now, there's something you don't see every day," Morrison observed.

"Sounded like it must have come down right in the middle of town," Hendricks said, "judging from how long it took the noise to get here. Eleven hundred feet a second, isn't it?"

Morrison nodded. "About a mile, I'd guess. More champagne?"

Hendricks extended his glass. "Please."

"Good champagne," Hendricks said, after sipping the bubbly.

"Come on, tell me about the microbrewery. You know you want to."

There was a fair amount of noise, not at all usual for midnight in Beaverton, Oregon. They rolled up the sidewalks at nine and even the Safeway wasn't open all night. Whitebread Republicans tended to keep it down, usually. But here was all this crunching, explosions, sirens and the like.

"You don't suppose that had anything to do with Sam Sewall, do you?" Hendricks said. He waved. The hole in the sky was closing up. Another few seconds and you'd never be able to tell it had been there. "You know, that business about him painting his house blue and it turning back to yellow overnight?"

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Sewall lived three houses down. Nice fella. Also hated the neighborhood association, which made him aces in Morrison's book. Morrison took another goodly sip of his own wine. "No, I don't think so. Sewall's wife is a witch, and he forgot to ask her if he could paint the place."

"Ah. Never a good idea to take the missus for granted."

"Amen."

Next door, the outside floodlights went on and Mr. Arlo McCartney, fifty and bald as an egg, ran from his house into the back yard, screaming. He wore a red flannel nightshirt.

Morrison raised his eyebrows.

"Perhaps we should go in?" Hendricks ventured.

"And have McCartney see us dangling our naked pendulums in the cold night air? I think not."

A dinosaur ran out of McCartney's house, leaning forward tail extended behind it like a rudder, teeth clacking as it snapped its jaws shut. It looked around. Spied McCartney.

McCartney screamed and ducked behind the metal tool shed, then slid in between the shed and the wooden good-neighbor fence.

The dinosaur, about as tall as a pro basketball player — if you didn't count the tail — scrabbled at the edge of the shed, but couldn't reach McCartney.

Score one for the bald guy.

"Help! Help! Somebody help!"

"Velociraptor?" Hendricks wondered aloud.

"Nah, T. rex."

"Awfully small, isn't it? I thought tyrannosaurs were bigger than that."

"Well, sure, usually. But look at the shape of the head. And the tiny forelegs, that's the giveaway. Maybe it's a dwarf. Or a midget."

"Ah."

Frustrated at not being able to get to its prey, the dinosaur bleated. It sounded like a giant sheep.

"Spielberg sure got that part wrong," Morrison said. He sipped at his champagne.

"Help! Morrison! Call the police! Call the SPCA! Call the goddamned Marines!"

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The dinosaur took a deep breath and blew it at McCartney. The breath came out as a burst of bright red-orange flame.

"Urk — !" McCartney began.

Then he was reduced to a burnt-out cinder the size of a small toaster. Smoke rose from the little mound of ash. The air was filled with the smell of McDonald's at noon. You want fries with that Big Mac?

"Looks like both you *and* Spielberg were wrong," Hendricks observed. "It's not a Tyrannosaurus, it's a dragon."

The creature turned, looked at the two in the hot tub, shook its head, then went back into McCartney's house.

"McCartney's not married, is he?" Hendricks asked.

"No."

"Well, if it's not Mrs. McCartney, then it is definitely a dragon."

"I sit corrected," Morrison said. He sighed. "But I am getting wrinkled. Maybe we should go inside."

"Well, let's finish the bottle first, shall we?"

"You *are* going to tell me about the stock offering for that beer place?"

"Since you're twisting my arm, okay."

"Now you're talking." Morrison waved at the CD player. "Put something else on, would you? I don't want to listen to Jerry and the boys wander around in minor chord-land for thirty minutes."

"Sure. Stones? Beatles?"

"How about the Jefferson Airplane? That seems appropriate, doesn't it?"

Hendricks grinned. "It does, doesn't it?"

"PETER MORRISON!" came a thunderous voice from Heaven.

"That would be...God?" Hendricks said.

"Be my guess," Morrison said. "Hey, God, how's it going?"

"SAME OLD, SAME OLD. AND YOURSELF?"

"Hey, I can't complain. Got the tub, my best friend who is going to help me make some money, really good French champagne."

"MUST BE NICE,". God said. "I WOULD LOVE TO STAY AND VISIT BUT I HAVE TO GO NOW, DEITY'S WORK IS NEVER DONE."

"Thanks for dropping by," Morrison said. He raised his glass in a silent toast.

"Been a long time since I talked to God," Hendricks said. "Back in '70, '71. Most of the time, I wound up in the bathroom talking to my penis."

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Morrison smiled. "Ah, yes, I've had a conversation or two with Mr. Johnson myself."

"Short conversations, no doubt," Hendricks said.

"Speak for yourself, pal. Mine Wiener Schnitzel plumps when he heats up, just like those hot dogs on TV. Gets longer, too. Real long."

"Do tell. And is this water cold?"

"Internal heat, my man, internal heat."

Grace Slick's all-too-wise buttery voice floated from the speakers mounted on the outside wall of Morrison's house, wrapped itself around the two men like the arms of a lover. Sang of pills that made you change your size. Sang of rabbits. Sang of psychedelic sights and sounds most people never knew. But places that were out there, all the same.

A pterodactyl soared overhead, and the spotlights picked it out. Ack-ack guns fired, hit the flying creature. It spiraled down and left a trail of smoke and flame. Crashed into a house across the street.

"That Richards' place it hit?"

"So it appears. But — who can say?"

Both men laughed.

"About finished with that wine?"

"Last sip."

"Here, I'll get the towels."

Both men stood. Glanced surreptitiously at each other. Not bad shape for ex-hippies in their late forties, they both figured. All things considered.

As a throbbing orange and green...*something* settled onto the house behind his and melted everything into a swirling widdershins puddle, Morrison said, "You know, I always knew the sixties would come in handy someday."

Hendricks smiled, raised his hand, and gave Morrison the peace sign.

They went inside.

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Every year, Charles de Lint writes a short story for his wife, MaryAnn Harris. He also publishes the story in a nifty chapbook and mails it to friends as a Christmas present. No one else gets to see the story.

Except on those wonderful occasions when Charles decides to share the story with the rest of us. As he has done here.

Crow Girls

By Charles de Lint

I remember what somebody said about nostalgia, he said it's okay to look back, as long as you don't stare.

— Tom Paxton, from an interview with Ken Rockburn

PEOPLE HAVE A FUNNY way of remembering where they've been, who they were. Facts fall by the wayside. Depending on their temperament they either remember a golden time when all was better than well, better than it can be again, better than it ever really was: a first love, the endless expanse of a summer vacation, youthful vigor, the sheer novelty of being alive that gets lost when the world starts wearing you down. Or they focus in on the bad, blow little incidents all out of proportion, hold grudges for years, or maybe they really did have some unlucky times, but now they're reliving them forever in their heads instead of moving on.

But the brain plays tricks on us all, doesn't it? We go by what it tells us, have to I suppose, because what else do we have to use as touchstones?

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Trouble is we don't ask for confirmation on what the brain tells us. Things don't have to be real, we just have to believe they're real, which pretty much explains politics and religion as much as it does what goes on inside our heads.

Don't get me wrong; I'm not pointing any fingers here. My people aren't guiltless either. The only difference is our memories go back a lot further than yours do.

"I don't get computers," Heather said.

Jilly laughed. "What's not to get? "

They were having cappuccinos in the Cyberbean Café, sitting at the long counter with computer terminals spaced along its length the way those little individual juke boxes used to be in highway diners. Jilly looked as though she'd been using the tips of her dark ringlets as paintbrushes, then cleaned them on the thighs of her jeans — in other words, she'd come straight from the studio without changing first. But however haphazardly messy she might allow herself or her studio to get, Heather knew she'd either cleaned her brushes, or left them soaking in turps before coming down to the café. Jilly might seem terminally easygoing, but some things she didn't blow off. No matter how the work was going — good, bad or indifferent — she treated her tools with respect.

As usual, Jilly's casual scruffiness made Heather feel overdressed, for all that she was only wearing cotton pants and a blouse, nothing fancy. But she always felt a little like that around Jilly, ever since she'd first taken a class from her at the Newford School of Art a couple of winters ago. No matter how hard she tried, she hadn't been able to shake the feeling that she looked so typical: the suburban working mother, the happy wife. The differences since she and Jilly had first met weren't great. Her blonde hair had been long then while now it was cropped short. She was wearing glasses now instead of her contacts.

And two years ago she hadn't been carrying an empty wasteland around inside her chest

"Besides," Jilly added. "You use a computer at work, don't you?"

"Sure, but that's work," Heather said. "Not games and computer screen romances and stumbling around the Internet, looking for information you're never going to find a use for outside of Trivial Pursuit."

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"I think it's bringing back a sense of community," Jilly said.

"Oh, right."

"No, think about it. All these people who might have been just vegging out in front of a TV are chatting with each other in cyberspace instead — hanging out, so to speak, with kindred spirits that they might never have otherwise met."

Heather sighed. "But it's not real, human contact."

"No. But at least it's contact."

"I suppose."

Jilly regarded her over the brim of her glass coffee mug. It was a mild gaze, not in the least probing, but Heather couldn't help but feel as though Jilly was seeing right inside her head, all the way down to where desert winds blew through the empty space where her heart had been.

"So what's the real issue?" Jilly asked.

Heather shrugged. "There's no issue." She took a sip of her own coffee, then tried on a smile. "I'm thinking of moving downtown."

"Really?"

"Well, you know. I already work here. There's a good school for the kids. It just seems to make sense."

"How does Peter feel about it?"

Heather hesitated for a long moment, then sighed again. "Peter's not really got anything to say about it."

"Oh, no. You guys always seemed so...." Jilly's voice trailed off. "Well, I guess you weren't really happy, were you?"

"I don't know what we were anymore. I just know we're not together. There wasn't a big blowup or anything. He wasn't cheating on me and I certainly wasn't cheating on him. We're just...not together."

"It must be so weird."

Heather nodded. "Very weird. It's a real shock, suddenly discovering after all these years that we really don't have much in common at all."

Jilly's eyes were warm with sympathy. "How are you holding up?"

"Okay, I suppose. But it's so confusing. I don't know what to think, who I am, what I thought I was doing with the last fifteen years of my life. I mean, I don't regret the girls — I'd've had more children if we could have had them — but everything else...."

She didn't know how to begin to explain.

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"I married Peter when I was eighteen and I'm forty-one now. I've been a part of a couple for longer than I've been anything else, but except for the girls, I don't know what any of it meant anymore. I don't know who I am. I thought we'd be together forever, that we'd grow old together, you know? But now it's just me. Casey's fifteen and Janice is twelve. I've got another few years of being a mother, but after that, who am I? What am I going to do with myself?"

"You're still young," Jilly said. "And you look gorgeous."

"Right."

"Okay. A little pale today, but still."

Heather shook her head. "I don't know why I'm telling you this. I haven't told anybody."

"Not even your mom or your sister?"

"Nobody. It's...."

She could feel tears welling up, the vision blurring, but she made herself take a deep breath. It seemed to help. Not a lot, but some. Enough to carry on. How to explain why she wanted to keep it a secret? It wasn't as though it was something she could keep hidden forever.

"I think I feel like a failure," she said.

Her voice was so soft she almost couldn't hear herself, but Jilly reached over and took her hand.

"You're not a failure. Things didn't work out, but that doesn't mean it was your fault. It takes two people to make or break a relationship.

"I suppose. But to have put in all those years...."

Jilly smiled "If nothing else, you've got two beautiful daughters to show for them."

Heather nodded. The girls did a lot to keep the emptiness at bay, but once they were in bed, asleep, and she was by herself, alone in the dark, sitting on the couch by the picture window, staring down the street at all those other houses just like her own, that desolate place inside her seemed to go on forever.

She took another sip of her coffee and looked past Jilly to where two young women were sitting at a corner table, heads bent together, whispering. It was hard to place their ages — anywhere from late teens to early twenties, sisters, perhaps, with their small builds and similar dark looks, their black clothing and short blue-black hair. For no reason she could

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explain, simply seeing them made her feel a little better.

"Remember what it was like to be so young?" she said.

Jilly turned, following her gaze, then looked back at Heather.

"You never think about stuff like this at that age," Heather went on.

"I don't know," Jilly said. "Maybe not. But you have a thousand other anxieties that probably feel way more catastrophic."

"You think?"

Jilly nodded. "I know. We all like to remember it as a perfect time, but most of us were such bundles of messed-up hormones and nerves I'm surprised we ever managed to reach twenty."

"I suppose. But still, looking at those girls...."

Jilly turned again, leaning her head on her arm. "I know what you mean. They're like a piece of summer on a cold winter's morning."

It was a perfect analogy, Heather thought, especially considering the winter they'd been having. Not even the middle of December and the snowbanks were already higher than her chest, the temperature a seriously cold minus-fifteen.

"I have to remember their faces," Jilly went on. "For when I get back to the studio. The way they're leaning so close to each other — like confidantes, sisters in their hearts, if not by blood. And look at the fine bones in their features...how dark their eyes are."

Heather nodded. "It'd make a great picture."

It would, but the thought of it depressed her. She found herself yearning desperately in that one moment to have had an entirely different life, it almost didn't matter what. Perhaps one that had no responsibility but to draw great art from the world around her the way Jilly did. If she hadn't had to support Peter while he was going through law school, maybe she would have stuck with her art....

Jilly swiveled in her chair, the sparkle in her eyes deepening into concern once more.

"Anything you need, anytime," she said. "Don't be afraid to call me."

Heather tried another smile. "We could chat on the Internet."

"I think I agree with what you said earlier: I like this better."

"Me, too," Heather said. Looking out the window, she added, "It's snowing again."

* * *

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Maida and Zia are forever friends. Crow girls with spiky blue-black hair and eyes so dark it's easy to lose your way in them. A little raggedy and never quiet, you can't miss this pair: small and wild and easy in their skins, living on Zen time. Sometimes they forget they're crows, left their feathers behind in the long ago, and sometimes they forget they're girls. But they never forget that they're friends.

People stop and stare at them wherever they go, borrowing a taste of them, drawn by they don't know what, they just have to look, try to get close, but keeping their distance, too, because there's something scary/craving about seeing animal spirits so pure walking around on a city street. It's a shock, like plunging into cold water at dawn, waking up from the comfortable familiarity of warm dreams to find, if only for a moment, that everything's changed. And then, just before the way you know the world to be comes rolling back in on you, maybe you hear giddy laughter, or the slow flap of crows' wings. Maybe you see a couple of dark-haired girls sitting together in the corner of a café, heads bent together, pretending you can't see them, or could be they're perched on a tree branch, looking down at you looking up, working hard at putting on serious faces but they can't stop smiling.

It's like that rhyme, "two for mirth." They can't stop smiling and neither can you. But you've got to watch out for crow girls. Sometimes they wake a yearning you'll be hard-pressed to put back to sleep. Sometimes only a glimpse of them can start up a familiar ache deep in your chest, an ache you can't name, but you've felt it before, early mornings, lying alone in your bed, trying to hold onto the fading tatters of a perfect dream. Sometimes they blow bright the coals of a longing that can't ever be eased.

HEATHER COULDN'T STOP thinking of the two girls she'd seen in the café earlier in the evening. It was as though they'd lodged pieces of themselves inside her, feathery slivers winging dreamily across the wasteland. Long after she'd read Janice a story, then watched the end of a Barbara Walters special with Casey, she found herself sitting up by the big picture window in the living room when she should be in bed herself. She regarded the street through a veil of falling snow, but this time she wasn't looking at the houses, so alike except for the varying heights of their snowbanks

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they might as well all be the same one. Instead, she was looking for two small women with spiky black hair, dark shapes against the white snow.

There was no question but that they knew exactly who they were, she thought when she realized what she was doing. Maybe they could tell her who she was. Maybe they could come up with an exotic past for her so that she could reinvent herself, be someone like them, free, sure of herself. Maybe they could at least tell her where she was going.

But there were no thin, dark-haired girls out on the snowy street, and why should there be? It was too cold. Snow was falling thick with another severe winter storm warning in effect tonight. Those girls were safe at home. She knew that. But she kept looking for them all the same because in her chest she could feel the beat of dark wings — not the sudden panic that came out of nowhere when once again the truth of her situation reared without warning in her mind, but a strange, alien feeling. A sense that some otherness was calling to her.

The voice of that otherness scared her almost more than the gray landscape lodged in her chest.

She felt she needed a safety net, to be able to let herself go and not have to worry about where she fell. Somewhere where she didn't have to think, be responsible, to do anything. Not forever. Just for a time.

She knew Jilly was right about nostalgia. The memories she carried forward weren't necessarily the way things had really happened. But she yearned, if only for a moment, to be able to relive some of those simpler times, those years in high school before she'd met Peter, before they were married, before her emotions got so complicated.

And then what?

You couldn't live in the past. At some point you had to come up for air and then the present would be waiting for you, unchanged. The wasteland in her chest would still stretch on forever. She'd still be trying to understand what had happened. Had Peter changed? Had she changed? Had they both changed? And when did it happen? How much of their life together had been a lie?

It was enough to drive her mad.

It was enough to make her want to step into the otherness calling to her from out there in the storm and snow, step out and simply let it swallow her whole.

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Jilly couldn't put the girls from the café out of her mind either, but for a different reason. As soon as she'd gotten back to the studio, she'd taken her current work-in-progress down from the easel and replaced it with a fresh canvas. For a long moment she stared at the texture of the pale ground, a mix of gesso and a light burnt ochre acrylic wash, then she took up a stick of charcoal and began to sketch the faces of the two dark-haired girls before the memory of them left her mind.

She was working on their bodies, trying to capture the loose splay of their limbs and the curve of their backs as they'd slouched in toward each other over the café table, when there came a knock at her door.

"It's open," she called over her shoulder, too intent on what she was doing to look away.

"I could've been some mad, psychotic killer," Geordie said as he came in.

He stamped his feet on the mat, brushed the snow from his shoulders and hat. Setting his fiddlecase down by the door, he went over to the kitchen counter to see if Jilly had any coffee on.

"But instead," Jilly said, "it's only a mad, psychotic fiddler, so I'm entirely safe."

"There's no coffee."

"Sure there is. It's just waiting for you to make it."

Geordie put on the kettle, then rummaged around in the fridge, trying to find which tin Jilly was keeping her coffee beans in this week. He found them in one that claimed to hold Scottish shortbreads.

"You want some?" he asked.

Jilly shook her head. "How's Tanya?"

"Heading back to L.A. I just saw her off at the airport. The driving's horrendous. There were cars in the ditch every couple of hundred feet and I thought the bus would never make it back."

"And yet, it did," Jilly said.

Geordie smiled.

"And then," she went on, "because you were feeling bored and lonely, you decided to come visit me at two o'clock in the morning."

"Actually, I was out of coffee and I saw your light was on." He crossed the loft and came around behind the easel so that he could see what she

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was working on. "Hey, you're doing the crow girls."

"You know them?"

Geordie nodded. "Maida and Zia. You've caught a good likeness of them — especially Zia. I love that crinkly smile of hers."

"You can tell them apart?"

"You can't?"

"I never saw them before tonight. Heather and I were in the Cyberbean and there they were, just asking to be drawn." She added a bit of shading to the underside of a jaw, then turned to look at Geordie. "Why do you call them the crow girls?"

Geordie shrugged. "I don't. Or at least I didn't until I was talking to Jack Daw and that's what he called them when they came sauntering by. The next time I saw them I was busking in front of St. Paul's, so I started to play 'The Blackbird,' just to see what would happen, and sure enough, they came over to talk to me."

"Crow girls," Jilly repeated. The name certainly fit.

"They're some kind of relation to Jack," Geordie explained, "but I didn't quite get it. Cousins, maybe."

Jilly was suddenly struck with the memory of a long conversation she'd had with Jack one afternoon. She was working up sketches of the Crowsea Public Library for a commission when he came and sat beside her on the grass. With his long legs folded under him, black brimmed hat set at a jaunty angle, he'd regaled her with a long, rambling discourse on what he called the continent's real first nations.

"Animal people," she said softly.

Geordie smiled. "I see he fed you that line, too."

But Jilly wasn't really listening — not to Geordie. She was remembering another part of that old conversation, something else Jack had told her.

"The thing we really don't get," he'd said, leaning back in the grass, "is these contracted families you have. The mother, the father, the children, all living alone in some big house. Our families extend as far as our bloodlines and friendship can reach."

"I don't know much about bloodlines," Jilly had said. "But I know about friends."

He'd nodded. "That's why I'm talking to you."

Jilly blinked and looked at Geordie. "It made sense what he said."

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Geordie smiled. "Of course it did. Immortal animal people."

"That, too. But I was talking about the weird way we think about families and children. Most people don't even like kids — don't want to see, hear, or hear about them. But when you look at other cultures, even close to home...up on the rez, in Chinatown, Little Italy...it's these big rambling extended families, everybody taking care of everybody else."

Geordie cleared his throat. Jilly waited for him to speak but he went instead to unplug the kettle and finish making the coffee. He ground up some beans and the noise of the hand-cranked machine seemed to reach out and fill every corner of the loft. When he stopped, the sudden silence was profound, as though the city outside was holding its breath along with the inheld breath of the room. Jilly was still watching him when he looked over at her.

"We don't come from that kind of family," he said finally.

"I know. That's why we had to make our own."

IT'S LATE AT NIGHT, snow whirling in dervishing gusts, and the crow girls are perched on the top of the wooden fence that's been erected around a work site on Williamson Street. Used to be a parking lot there, now it's a big hole in the ground on its way to being one more office complex that nobody except the contractors want. The top of the fence is barely an inch wide at the top and slippery with snow, but they have no trouble balancing there.

Zia has a ring with a small spinning disc on it. Painted on the disc is a psychedelic coil that goes spiraling down into infinity. She keeps spinning it and the two of them stare down into the faraway place at the center of the spiral until the disc slows down, almost stops. Then Zia gives it another flick with her fingernail, and the coil goes spiraling down again.

"Where'd you get this anyway?" Maida asks.

Zia shrugs. "Can't remember. Found it somewhere."

"In someone's pocket."

"And you never did?"

Maida grins. "Just wish I'd seen it first, that's all."

They watch the disc some more, content.

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"What do you think it's like down there?" Zia says after a while. "On the other side of the spiral."

Maida has to think about that for a moment. "Same as here," she finally announces, then winks. "Only dizzier."

They giggle, leaning into each other, tottering back and forth on their perch, crow girls, can't be touched, can't hardly be seen, except someone's standing down there on the sidewalk, looking up through the falling snow, his worried expression so comical it sets them off on a new round of giggles.

"Careful now! " he calls up to them. He thinks they're on drugs — they can tell. "You don't want to — "

Before he can finish, they hold hands and let themselves fall backward, off the fence.

"Oh, Christ!"

He jumps, gets a handhold on the top of the fence and hauls himself up. But when he looks over, over and down, way down, there's nothing to be seen. No girls lying at the bottom of that big hole in the ground, nothing at all. Only the falling snow. It's like they were never there.

His arms start to ache and he lowers himself back down the fence, lets go, bending his knees slightly to absorb the impact of the last couple of feet. He slips, catches his balance. It seems very still for a moment, so still he can hear an odd rhythmical whispering sound. Like wings. He looks up, but there's too much snow coming down to see anything. A cab comes by, skidding on the slick street, and he blinks. The street's full of city sounds again, muffled, but present. He hears the murmuring conversation of a couple approaching him, their shoulders and hair white with snow. A snowplow a few streets over. A distant siren.

He continues along his way, but he's walking slowly now, trudging through the drifts, not thinking so much of two girls sitting on top of a fence as remembering how, when he was a boy, he used to dream that he could fly.

After fiddling a little more with her sketch, Jilly finally put her charcoal down. She made herself a cup of herbal tea with the leftover hot water in the kettle and joined Geordie where he was sitting on the sofa, watching the snow come down. It was warm in the loft, almost cozy compared to the storm on the other side of the windowpanes, or maybe

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because of the storm. Jilly leaned back on the sofa, enjoying the companionable silence for a while before she finally spoke.

"How do you feel after seeing the crow girls?" she asked.

Geordie turned to look at her. "What do you mean, how do I feel?"

"You know, good, bad...different..."

Geordie smiled. "Don't you mean 'indifferent?'"

"Maybe." She picked up her tea from the crate where she'd set it and took a sip. "Well?" she asked when he didn't continue.

"Okay. How do I feel? Good, I suppose. They're fun, they make me smile. In fact, just thinking of them now makes me feel good. "

Jilly nodded thoughtfully as he spoke. "Me, too. And something else as well."

"The different," Geordie began. He didn't quite sigh. "You believe those stories of Jack's, don't you?"

"Of course. And you don't?"

"I'm not sure," he replied, surprising her.

"Well, I think these crow girls were in the Cyberbean for a purpose," Jilly said. "Like in that rhyme about crows."

Geordie got it right away. "Two for mirth."

Jilly nodded. "Heather needed some serious cheering up. Maybe even something more. You know how when you start feeling low, you can get on this descending spiral of depression...everything goes wrong, things get worse, because you expect them to?"

"Fight it with the power of positive thinking, I always say."

"Easier said than done when you're feeling that low. What you really need at a time like that is something completely unexpected to kick you out of it and remind you that there's more to life than the hopeless, gray expanse you think is stretching in every direction. What Colin Wilson calls absurd good news."

"You've been talking to my brother."

"It doesn't matter where I got it from — it's still true."

Geordie shook his head. "I don't buy the idea that Maida and Zia showed up just to put your friend in a better mood. Even bird people can get a craving for a cup of coffee, can't they?"

"Well, yes," Jilly said. "But that doesn't preclude their being there for Heather as well. Sometimes when a person needs something badly

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enough, it just comes to them. A personal kind of steam engine time. You might not be able to articulate what it is you need, you might not even know you need something — at least, not at a conscious level — but the need's still there, calling out to whatever's willing to listen. "

Geordie smiled. "Like animal spirits."

"Crow girls."

Geordie shook his head. "Drink your tea and go to bed," he told her. "I think you need a good night's sleep."

"But — "

"It was only a coincidence. Things don't always have a meaning. Sometimes they just happen. And besides, how do you even know they had any effect on Heather?"

"I could just tell. And don't change the subject."

"I'm not."

"Okay," Jilly said. "But don't you see? It doesn't matter if it was a coincidence or not. They still showed up when Heather needed them. It's more of that 'small world, spooky world' stuff Professor Dapple goes on about. Everything's connected. It doesn't matter if we can't see how, it's still all connected. You know, chaos theory and all that."

Geordie shook his head, but he was smiling. "Does it ever strike you as weird when something Bramley's talked up for years suddenly becomes an acceptable element of scientific study?"

"Nothing strikes me as truly weird," Jilly told him. "There's only stuff I haven't figured out yet."

HEATHER BARELY SLEPT that night. For the longest time she simply couldn't sleep, and then when she finally did, she was awake by dawn. Wide awake, but heavy with an exhaustion that came more from heartache than lack of sleep.

Sitting up against the headboard, she tried to resist the sudden tightness in her chest, but that sad, cold wasteland swelled inside her. The bed seemed depressingly huge. She didn't so much miss Peter's presence as feel adrift in the bed's expanse of blankets and sheets. Adrift in her life. Why was it he seemed to have no trouble carrying on when the simple act of getting up in the morning felt as though it would

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require far more energy than she could ever hope to muster?

She stared at the snow swirling against her window, not at all relishing the drive into town on a morning like this. If anything, it was coming down harder than it had been last night. All it took was the suggestion of snow and everybody in the city seemed to forget how to drive, never mind common courtesy or traffic laws. A blizzard like this would snarl traffic and back it up as far as the mountains.

She sighed, supposing it was just as well she'd woken so early since it would take her at least an extra hour to get downtown today.

Up, she told herself, and forced herself to swing her feet to the floor and rise. A shower helped. It didn't really ease the headache, but the hiss of the water made it easier to ignore her thoughts. Coffee, when she was dressed and had brewed a pot, helped more, though she still winced when Janice came bounding into the kitchen.

"It's a snow day!" she cried. "No school. They just announced it on the radio. The school's closed, closed, closed!"

She danced about in her flannel nightie, pirouetting in the small space between the counter and the table.

"Just yours," Heather asked, "or Casey's, too?"

"Mine, too," Casey replied, following her sister into the room.

Unlike Janice, she was maintaining her cool, but Heather could tell she was just as excited. Too old to allow herself to take part in Janice's spontaneous celebration, but young enough to be feeling giddy with the unexpected holiday.

"Good," Heather said. "You can look after your sister."

"*Mom!*" Janice protested. "I'm not a baby."

"I know. It's just good to have someone older in the house when — "

"You *can't* be thinking of going in to work today," Casey said.

"We could do all kinds of stuff," Janice added. "Finish decorating the house. Baking."

"Yeah," Casey said, "all the things we don't seem to have time for anymore."

Heather sighed. "The trouble is," she explained, "the real world doesn't work like school. We don't get snow days."

Casey shook her head. "That is *so* unfair."

The phone rang before Heather could agree.

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"I'll bet it's your boss," Janice said as Heather picked up the phone. "Calling to tell you it's a snow day for you, too."

Don't I wish, Heather thought. But then what would she do at home all day? It was so hard being here, even with the girls, and much as she loved them. Everywhere she turned, something reminded her of how the promises of a good life had turned into so much ash. At least work kept her from brooding.

She brought the receiver up to her ear and spoke into the mouthpiece. "Hello?"

"I've been thinking," the voice on the other end of the line said. "About last night."

Heather had to smile. Wasn't that so Jilly, calling up first thing in the morning as though they were still in the middle of last night's conversation.

"What about last night?" she said.

"Well, all sorts of stuff. Like remembering a perfect moment in the past and letting it carry you through a hard time now. "

If only, Heather thought. " I don't have a moment that perfect," she said.

"I sort of got that feeling," Jilly told her. "That's why I think they were a message — a kind of perfect moment now that you can use the same way."

"What *are* you talking about?"

"The crow girls. In the café last night.

"The crow...." It took her a moment to realize what Jilly meant. Their complexions had been dark enough so she supposed they could have been Indians. "How do you know what tribe they belonged to?"

"Not Crow, Native American, " Jilly said, "but crow, bird people."

Heather shook her head as she listened to what Jilly went on to say, for all that only her daughters were here to see the movement. Glum looks had replaced their earlier excitement when they realized the call wasn't from her boss.

"Do you have any idea how improbable all of this sounds?" she asked when Jilly finished. "Life's not like your paintings."

"Says who?"

"How about common sense?"

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"Tell me," Jilly said. "Where did common sense ever get you?"

Heather sighed. "Things don't happen just because we want them to," she said.

"Sometimes that's *exactly* why they happen," Jilly replied. "They happen because we need them to."

"I don't live in that kind of a world."

"But you could."

Heather looked across the kitchen at her daughters once more. The girls were watching her, trying to make sense out of the one-sided conversation they were hearing. Heather wished them luck. She was hearing both sides and that didn't seem to help at all. You couldn't simply reinvent your world because you wanted to. Things just were how they were.

"Just think about it," Jilly added. "Will you do that much?"

"I..."

That bleak landscape inside Heather seemed to expand, growing so large there was no way she could contain it. She focused on the faces of her daughters. She remembered the crow girls in the café. There was so much innocence in them all, daughters and crow girls. She'd been just like them once and she knew it wasn't simply nostalgia coloring her memory. She knew there'd been a time when she lived inside each particular day, on its own and by itself, instead of trying to deal with all the days of her life at once, futilely attempting to reconcile the discrepancies and mistakes.

"I'll try," she said into the phone.

They said their good-byes and Heather slowly cradled the receiver.

"Who was that, Mom?" Casey asked.

Heather looked out the window. The snow was still falling, muffling the world. Covering its complexities with a blanket as innocent as the hope she saw in her daughters' eyes.

"Jilly," she said. She took a deep breath, then smiled at them. "She was calling to tell me that today really is a snow day. "

The happiness that flowered on their faces helped ease the tightness in her chest. The gray landscape waiting for her there didn't go away, but for some reason, it felt less profound. She wasn't even worried about what her boss would say when she called in to tell him she wouldn't be in today.

* * *

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Crow girls can move like ghosts. They'll slip into your house when you're not home, sometimes when you're only sleeping, go walking spirit-soft through your rooms and hallways, sit in your favorite chair, help themselves to cookies and beer, borrow a trinket or two which they'll mean to return and usually do. It's not break & enter so much as simple curiosity. They're worse than cats.

Privacy isn't in their nature. They don't seek it and barely understand the concept. Personal property is even more alien. The idea of ownership — that one can lay proprietary claim to a piece of land, an object, another person or creature — doesn't even register.

"Whatcha looking at?" Zia asks.

They don't know whose house they're in. Walking along on the street, trying to catch snowflakes on their tongues, one or the other of them suddenly got the urge to come inside. Upstairs, the family sleeps.

Maida shows her the photo album. "Look," she says. "It's the same people, but they keep changing. See, here she's a baby, then she's a little girl, then a teenager."

"Everything changes," Zia says. "Even we get old. Look at Crazy Crow."

"But it happens so fast with them."

Zia sits down beside her and they pore over the pictures, munching on apples they found earlier in a cold cellar in the basement.

Upstairs, a father wakes in his bed. He stares at the ceiling, wondering what woke him. Nervous energy crackles inside him like static electricity, a sudden spill of adrenaline, but he doesn't know why. He gets up and checks the children's rooms. They're both asleep. He listens for intruders, but the house is silent.

Stepping back into the hall, he walks to the head of the stairs and looks down. He thinks he sees something in the gloom, two dark-haired girls sitting on the sofa, looking through a photo album. Their gazes lift to meet his and hold it. The next thing he knows, he's on the sofa himself, holding the photo album in his hand. There are no strange girls sitting there with him. The house seems quieter than it's ever been, as though the fridge, the furnace and every clock the family owns are holding their breath along with him.

He sets the album down on the coffee table, walks slowly back up the stairs and returns to his bed. He feels like a stranger, misplaced. He doesn't

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know this room, doesn't know the woman beside him. All he can think about is the first girl he ever loved and his heart swells with a bittersweet sorrow. An ache pushes against his ribs, makes it almost impossible to breathe.

What if, what if....

He turns on his side and looks at his wife. For one moment her face blurs, becomes a morphing image that encompasses both her features and those of his first true love. For one moment it seems as though anything is possible, that for all these years he could have been married to another woman, to that girl who first held, then, unwittingly, broke his heart.

"No," he says.

His wife stirs, her features her own again. She blinks sleepily at him.

"What...?" she mumbles.

He holds her close, heartbeat drumming, more in love with her for being who she is than he has ever been before.

Outside, the crow girls are lying on their backs, making snow angels on his lawn, scissoring their arms and legs, shaping skirts and wings. They break their apple cores in two and give their angels eyes, then run off down the street, holding hands. The snow drifts are undisturbed by their weight. It's as though they, too, like the angels they've just made, also have wings.

"This is so cool," Casey tells her mother. "It really feels like Christmas. I mean, not like Christmases we've had, but, you know, like really being part of Christmas."

Heather nods. She's glad she brought the girls down to the soup kitchen to help Jilly and her friends serve a Christmas dinner to those less fortunate than themselves. She's been worried about how her daughters would take the break from tradition, but then realized, with Peter gone, tradition is already broken. Better to begin all over again.

The girls had been dubious when she first broached the subject with them — "I don't want to spend Christmas with *losers*," had been Casey's first comment.

Heather hadn't argued with her. All she'd said was, "I want you to think about what you just said."

Casey's response had been a sullen look — there were more and more of these lately — but Heather knew her own daughter well enough. Casey

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had stomped off to her room, but then come back half an hour later and helped her explain to Janice why it might not be the worst idea in the world.

She watches them now, Casey having rejoined her sister where they are playing with the homeless children, and knows a swell of pride. They're such good kids, she thinks as she takes another sip of her cider. After a couple of hours serving coffee, tea and hot cider, she'd really needed to get off her feet for a moment.

"Got something for you," Jilly says, sitting down on the bench beside her.

Heather accepts the small, brightly wrapped parcel with reluctance. "I thought we said we weren't doing Christmas presents."

"It's not really a Christmas present. It's more an everyday sort of a present that I just happen to be giving you today."

"Right. "

"So aren't you going to open it?"

Heather peels back the paper and opens the small box. Inside, nestled in a piece of folded Kleenex, are two small silver earrings cast in the shapes of crows.

Heather lifts her gaze.

"They're beautiful."

"Got them at the craft show from a local jeweler. His name's on the card in the bottom of the box. They're to remind you — "

Heather smiles. "Of crow girls?"

"Partly. But more to remember that this — " Jilly waves a hand that could be taking in the basement of St. Vincent's, could be taking in the whole world. "It's not all we get. There's more. We can't always see it, but it's there."

For a moment, Heather thinks she sees two dark-haired slim figures standing on the far side of the basement, but when she looks more closely they're only a bag lady and Geordie's friend Tanya, talking.

For a moment, she thinks she hears the sound of wings, but it's only the murmur of conversation. Probably.

What she knows for sure is that the gray landscape inside her chest is shrinking a little more, every day.

"Thank you," she says.

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She isn't sure if she's speaking to Jilly or to crow girls she's only ever seen once, but whose presence keeps echoing through her life. Her new life. It isn't necessarily a better one. Not yet. But at least it's on the way up from wherever she'd been going, not down into a darker despair.

"Here," Jilly says. "Let me help you put them on."

"We've lived here seventeen years, Artie.
I think it's time to see where that door leads."

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SCIENCE

JANET ASIMOV

BEING WARM-BLOODED

WE HUMANS are rather pompous about being "warm-blooded," looking down on creatures who are not. We even make "cold-blooded" into a term of opprobrium. It's well to remember that we warm-blooded ones (mammals and birds) are far outnumbered by species that are cold-blooded, and some of those have been successfully enjoying life on Earth for many millions of years.

The other day I had lunch with two friends in the Garden Cafe of my favorite place, the American Museum of Natural History. In the course of conversation they asked me what makes an animal warm-blooded. To my embarrassment, I found myself stumbling over the explanation. Now I will try to do better:

The terms "warm-blooded" and "cold-blooded" represent categories that are not simple and fixed in stone. They are dependent on many intermeshing factors.

For instance — you're a human mammal out in the desert sun, sweating under your hat and behind your sunglasses while you watch a lizard catch a fly. At that moment, the lizard's blood is warmer than yours. Later, when you're walking in the cool of night, accompanied by owls and furry mammals out for a midnight meal, your blood is warmer than that of the now sleeping lizard.

No matter what the environmental temperature is, mammalian temperatures usually range around 98.6 degrees F. (37 Celsius) and avian temperatures around 102.2 degrees F. (39 Celsius). This warmth increases the speed of chemical reactions, so mammals and birds can remain active at times when "cold-blooded" animals cannot.

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A better term for "being warm-blooded" is homeothermic — when an organism's body maintains a constant temperature. Another word for this is endothermic — heat from inside — and since I'm accustomed to that term, I will use it.

The general tendency of any living system to maintain internal constancy independent of the outside environment is called *homeostasis,* but this does not always include maintaining constant internal heat.

The history of this more inclusive term, homeostasis, is the history of life itself, whether the living organism is one cell or many. Homeostasis is impossible to maintain unless life separates itself from the environment.

A one-celled organism separates from the environment by surrounding itself with a membrane that preserves the identity of the body and permits exchange of substances between the body and the outside.

Inside the cell's boundary membrane is the semi-fluid stuff called cytoplasm. This contains an assortment of things like vacuoles for storage and excretion, protein-making machinery (ribosomes), chemically coded genetic information (deoxyribonucleic acid), various enzymes, etc. All this internal chemical machinery uses energy.

Energy is made available to cells by metabolism, the intricate biochemical processes of building up, breaking down, and performing various functions. Metabolism produces heat, and heat must not accumulate endlessly or the organism would eventually boil.

Heat from metabolism is easily dispersed in the ocean, where life originated. Except for the few mammals and birds that went back to the ocean to live, all sea-dwelling organisms are said to be poikilothermic — with body temperatures that vary. These "cold-blooded" animals are also called ectothermic (heat from outside), and that is the term I will use.

Ectotherms usually do not produce enough internal heat to maintain homeostasis and must rely on getting heat energy from the environment to achieve a body temperature that permits them to function.

The ocean was a good place for life to start. It is less likely to have sudden temperature extremes because water smooths them out. Arctic waters can be frigid and water around a coral reef can be warm, but you don't jump from one to the other.

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Sunlight warms surface water and the depths are cold, but most organisms usually adapt to one or the other. Some cool-adapted organisms rise to the upper ocean layers at night but sink lower when sunlight warms the surface.

Life on dry land is subject to much greater extremes of hot and cold, wet and dry. Land-dwelling causes more difficulties in maintaining ordinary homeostasis, much less endothermy.

The first creatures to venture out onto dry land — 1.2 billion years ago — were probably the cyanobacteria that had invented photosynthesis 3 billion years before and changed the oxygen content of Earth's atmosphere from 1 to 20 percent. On land, cyanobacteria received more sunlight and proceeded to break down rock to soil.

These land pioneers were followed by plants forming a scummy mat inhabited by worms and arthropods that ate dead plants, microorganisms, and each other. With hard outer surfaces, arthropods could manage the dryness of land life better than the worms, which must stay moist.

Arthropods evolved along with the plants that were changing to use the new soil, developing downward-growing roots and stiff stems to reach up to the sun. Arthropods eventually evolved the first fliers — insects, who were already diversified by 300 million years ago.

Insects are usually classified as ectotherms, but the bee is remarkably good at producing or getting rid of heat, which explains why it manages — like us — to live in both hot and cool areas of Earth.

When the weather is hot, a honeybee can extrude a droplet of liquid onto its tongue, where the liquid evaporates and cools off the bee. Japanese honeybees use heat in a remarkable way, according to Masato Ono and his colleagues at Tokyo's Tamagawa University. When the bees detect the pheromones of an invading hornet, they form a ball around this predator and shiver to increase the temperature so the hornet will die (the hornet's tolerance for heat is slightly less than that of the bees).

According to Bernd Heinrich (University of Vermont) and Harald Esch (University of Notre Dame), individual bees warm up quickly by shivering or by putting their flight muscles into tetanic contraction, without motion. Bees can also cluster together when it's cold, keeping the hive warm.

Bumblebees have a "furry" coat

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that reduces heat loss. In most bees, the abdomen serves as a heat-dispenser, but a bumblebee can also increase its abdominal temperature by contracting its diaphragm to send into the abdomen blood warmed by the flight muscles (thought to be more metabolically active than most tissues in the animal kingdom). A solitary queen bee will wrap her abdomen around the babies to keep them warm.

Perhaps we should not say that birds and mammals are the only endothermic creatures. As Heinrich and Esch propose, "the thermoregulatory virtuosity of bees rivals that of human beings."

While arthropods, like insects, were busily enjoying land life, two other species had also made it out of the ocean. Without the rigid exoskeletons of arthropods, land animals do better with at least some hard parts. Molluscs like octopi stayed in the sea, but some molluscs with shells became land snails.

Vertebrates had already developed a rigid internal skeleton in the sea. Those with weaker, cartilaginous skeletons — like those of sharks — stayed in the sea. Other sea vertebrates possessed true bone, composed of collagen impregnated with minerals like calcium carbonate, and containing blood vessels, bone cells, and nerves.

About 360 million years ago, some fish with true bony skeletons evolved legs and lungs and became amphibians, who were the reigning land vertebrates for 60 million years until their descendants, the reptiles, took over.

Although reptiles were the first vertebrates that did not have to go back into water to mate and lay eggs, they were still ectothermic. There is a striking contrast between ordinary reptilian skeletal bone and that of the warm-blooded mammals and birds that evolved from reptiles. Most reptiles keep growing, and their bone contains alternating rings almost like tree rings.

Mammals and birds have a more organized bone structure, with a better blood supply. The blood vessels are not randomly scattered through the bone but are surrounded by concentric rings of bone containing bone cells. This kind of bone makes possible rapid growth, but the edge of it has a "rest line," where the bone stops growing (mammals and birds usually stop growing at a certain size and age).

Dinosaurs seem to have had bones that were somewhat similar to those of mammals and birds, but with growth rings. Perhaps most

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dinosaurs kept growing like ordinary reptiles, but they may have been, well, almost endothermic.

Modern crocodiles are not descended from dinosaurs. In fact, crocodiles lived throughout the dinosaur era, surviving the asteroid debacle at the end of the Cretaceous period, 65 million years ago.

Despite what you may have heard about the New York sewer system, crocodiles do not live up North. They like to bask in the sun and generally behave like reptiles. Yet they do have larger brains than other living reptiles. Big, complicated brains need lots of oxygen and a more equable body temperature.

To maintain constant body temperature, you must have excellent blood circulation. Unlike its reptile relatives with three-chambered hearts, a crocodile possesses a four-chambered heart that completely separates arterial and venous blood, so that arterial blood coming from the lung goes to the brain with more oxygen in it.

Birds and mammals also have four-chambered hearts and an efficient circulatory system that helps keep all the tissues at a uniform temperature. To provide more oxygen for the circulatory system to send to actively metabolizing tissues, endotherms also have more complicated lungs than those of ectotherms.

To achieve an enormous surface area for absorbing oxygen, the inside of our lungs is divided into many air sacs called alveoli, whose cell walls permit the passage of gases in and out. Air taken in at the mouth goes down the trachea to the bronchi, which branch. The bronchial branches become many narrow bronchioles that end in ducts opening into the alveoli.

As Isaac once put it, "although the lungs are inside the body, the air within the lungs is not...it is only when the oxygen crosses the alveolar membrane that it enters the body." For instance, when a human gets an asthma attack, his bronchioles close up. At that point, none of the oxygen held in his lungs will do him any good because it doesn't get into his body cells.

To keep the oxygen-fed metabolic machinery going continuously and at a constant temperature during the evolution of endotherms, ways were found to conserve heat. Reptilian scales, for instance, evolved into hair or feathers that trap air as insulation (feathers do the job better).

Endotherms also have efficient skin under their hair or feathers. Human skin (not entirely naked

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because there are small soft hairs on even the smoothest skin) can cope with heat and cold better than anything inside the body.

The dead outer layer of skin is tougher than it looks because it contains keratin, also used to make our nails and hair (and the horns and hooves of many animals). Keratin is a fibrous protein containing a lot of sulfur, which may explain why burning hair smells so awful.

In spite of insulating feathers and hair, endotherms get rid of heat more efficiently than reptiles. Mad dogs and Englishmen may go out in the midday sun, but an ectothermic animal has trouble coping with its rise in body temperature. To cool off, most reptiles seek shade. Some tortoises even urinate on their own legs to create cooling evaporation.

According to observations by Michael D. Robinson at the Namib Desert Research Station, sand lizards pick the cooler dune slopes and sit upright to catch any cooling breeze. When severely hard-pressed by heat, these lizards dance on the sand — alternating lifted legs to keep their feet from burning. If this tactic fails, they burrow into the sand to escape the sun.

Overly warm humans sweat and — unless it's a muggy Manhattan day — are cooled by this evaporating moisture. Birds have no sweat glands. Pity the penguins that live in the temperate zone and are still covered with warm, interlocking, insulating feathers. On land, they must pick a shaded sanctuary and pant.

We humans have used our impressive brains to invent fans, refrigeration, and air conditioning. In the millennia before we achieved these marvels, we sat under shady trees, inside cool caves or in the homes we built against the elements.

I unfortunately can remember the hot days of yore (BHAC — before home air conditioning), when fans were not enough and one sometimes retreated to the cooler basement with a wet towel around the head and a cold lemonade in the hand, or went to a blissfully cool movie, or spent the summer in Maine.

Our bodies are made largely of protein, composed of long chains of amino acids in sheets or coiled up, linked by peptide bonds. When proteins are heated, the peptide bonds break and the protein changes — for the worse, the higher the heat and the faster the heating.

One of the few things I retain from the organic chemistry I took

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in some other lifetime is the necessity of cooking proteins slowly, preferably at lower temperatures, so they will undergo change in a more palatable way. Fry an egg too hot and fast, and it's rubbery. High heat tends to toughen meat, particularly if it's a cheaper cut, full of connective tissue that won't soften without long cooking. Which explains why stews are better when cooked a long time, and then reheated the next day.

Our body proteins should not get too hot. To keep cool, many endothermic animals including us must drink a lot of water, but two groups of animals — carnivores like dogs and artiodactyls like sheep and antelopes — have a way of saving water. They possess an interesting "rete" tangle of arteries in the cavernous sinus at the base of their brains.

When these animals pant, moisture evaporates from and cools the veins inside their muzzles. This venous blood goes to the cavernous sinus and cools the rete — which then is able to send cooler arterial blood to the brain.

Protecting the brain is certainly the most important aspect of the homeostasis of larger animals. This includes keeping the brain at the same temperature summer and winter, a difficult task but usually one that endothermic animals do well.

Primates have the largest and most complicated brains on land. All primates have obvious body hair except humans. Our relative hairlessness makes it easier to lose heat from the body, but is no protection from the sun. It is thought that one reason early hominids walked upright was to keep exposure to the sun at a minimum. Logically enough, we have retained protective hair on our heads, the part of our anatomy receiving the most sunlight.

We need to protect our heads. Too much internal heat (from a high fever) can produce brain damage in a human. Too much exposure to high external temperature can also cause severe problems for humans.

Heat exhaustion (hypovolemic shock) is due to heavy loss of fluid; heatstroke (hyperpyrexia) is due to failure of the body's ability to lose heat. High humidity reduces the cooling from sweat evaporation and makes things worse.

Vomiting, diarrhea, or even excessive sweating from overexertion can produce too much loss of fluid as well as the loss of important electrolytes like potassium, magnesium, and sodium. Obesity

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only adds to the danger, as does the taking of anticholinergic medications, alcohol, and addictive drugs.

In hot weather many older people are subject to confusion and other signs of brain distress because they are less aware of being hot and have other problems — like physical frailty, taking certain medications, poor intake of fluid — that diminish the body's ability to cope with heat.

One of the dire things about global warming is that we can manage cold better than heat. At least, having Viking ancestors makes me think that I can. Which brings me to the other end of the thermometer.

Endothermic animals cope with cold environments in various ways, like thick fur over layers of fat, plus heavy-duty eating. Endotherms eat a lot, often — research shows that eighty percent of the food eaten by birds and mammals is used to maintain body temperature. Reptiles can eat less often and only a tenth as much per body weight. There are few reptiles in cold climates.

A cold climate mammal tends to be bigger than its relatives in warmer climates, because a large body retains more heat than a small one. Nevertheless, some remarkably small birds — like the winter chickadees in Manhattan's Central Park — manage to survive in cold climates.

In winter, birds grow thicker down and feathers to retain heat, and many eat a fattier diet of seeds that fuels their tremendous metabolic rate — keeping their body temperature higher than that of mammals.

In the extremities of endotherms, arteries and veins are close together — the hot arterial blood warming the cooler venous blood so that some of the heat goes back to the heart instead of being diffused through the skin and lost to the environment. Furthermore, because the venous blood is made warmer, blood returning to the heart is not too cold.

Birds have a particularly close arrangement of venules and arterioles in the legs, which helps keep their feet from freezing. Most birds also roost on one leg, tucking the other into feathers and changing legs occasionally. The extremities are, however, always cooler than the body. In winter this helps conserve body heat.

Strangely enough, the leg nerves of winter birds maintain the ability to transmit impulses in spite of the fact that the proximal end of

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the nerve is at 102.2 degrees F. and the distal end, out in the leg, is perhaps as low as 35.6 degrees F.

The leg nerves of mammals do not do as well, tending to shut down when one end is too cold. This explains why humans with frostbite do not feel warning pain in their feet or hands, and why polar bears have enormously padded, furry feet to keep their feet warm on Arctic ice.

Although all birds are endothermic, many birds of all sizes (and many mammals) migrate to warmer climates for the winter. There they have an easier time finding food and maintaining general homeostasis. The tiny, active ruby-throated hummingbird of the eastern U.S. migrates 1850 miles to Central America. No matter where it lives, however, the hummingbird maintains its body temperature by eating twice its weight in food every day.

Some endotherms have what is called "temporal heterothermy" because they change their body temperature to suit the season. Hibernation occurs in the cold; aestivation in the heat. These tactics of becoming torpid result in a slowing of metabolism, conserving energy for a time more suitable for active living.

Newly conceived offspring of all endotherms must be protected from heat and cold. We and the other placental mammals do this by feeding the fetus inside the mother's body until it is strong enough to cope better with outside temperatures.

Birds' eggs must be incubated, usually by the body heat of individuals of the same species. Some birds build elaborate nests, lined with down or moss that protects the eggs. Then there's the Emperor penguin, laying her egg on ice during the Antarctic winter. She incubates the egg by holding it under her well-feathered body — on her feet.

Our ancestors who tried living in cold climates learned to protect themselves from heat loss by wearing the skins of animals and, later, woven cloth. They were careful to save their precious fire and eventually learned how to make it. They huddled under animal skins in their caves, or in the houses they constructed as protection against the elements. Keeping efficiently endothermic often takes a lot of work.

Exposure to cold makes people shiver, producing heat from muscular contraction. If exposure to cold is bad enough and long enough,

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the result is hypothermia — in which the body cannot maintain normal temperature.

Hypothermia is bad for the brain, although the human vascular system usually tries to keep the brain warm at the expense of other areas of the body, like the extremities. This is why frostbite of noses, hands and feet can occur long before the brain begins to shut down.

When it's cold, people don't feel thirsty, or they drink alcohol thinking it will warm them, and the resulting dehydration adds to the possibility of hypothermia. Again, this is more likely to occur in older people, who are often anemic, with poor muscle tone and circulation, and who are taking medications that disturb the body's regulatory systems.

In severe hypothermia people are confused, may hallucinate, and eventually become lethargic. Respiration and heart beat slow and finally stop. Sometimes these people can be restored to consciousness by various measures such as being warmed and given intravenous fluids. Children are more likely to recover without brain damage, but adults are often not so lucky.

The high-tech endothermic metabolisms of birds and mammals may have made it possible for us to do much that reptiles and amphibians cannot do, but the price is that our bodies do not recover as easily from being overheated or overchilled for too long a time. This makes it harder to believe in the practical feasibility of freezing people. At the present time, we probably cannot claim (as many people do claim) that there is safe and workable cryogenic storage of human beings.

I think it is useless to freeze a human body in the hope that it can be resuscitated at some future time when the disease that killed it has been conquered. Or when its bank account has accumulated to millions.

Nevertheless, I hope that cryogenic research continues. After all, we must conquer the freezing problem before we can put endothermic creatures into a frozen sleep and send them to the stars. For now — frogs, yes; astronauts, no.

So, would someone please invent a stasis machine?

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Linda Nagata's first novel, The Bohr Maker, *won the 1996 Locus Award for Best First Novel. Her third novel,* Deception Well, *has just appeared from Bantam Spectra.*

She returns to our pages with "The Bird Catcher's Children." She says that the story had an odd beginning. "While looking at open houses," she writes, "my husband and I stumbled across a hand-made house in ruinous condition, at the end of a pitted dirt road in a forested area. For the past several months, only birds had lived there. The isolation and unusual character of the house struck a note with me. I wanted to use it in a story, and ultimately, it became Harysen's house."

The Bird Catcher's Children

By Linda Nagata

HARYSEN CROUCHED amongst the thick mosses and fine-leafed vegetation of the forest floor. The rain dripped around him, drizzling off his graying hair and the mildewed lens of his camera. He'd lived in this forest for nearly a month now and in that time the rain had never stopped. It cloaked the forest in a misty curtain, like some jealous spirit unwilling to share even a glimpse of its dominion with the world beyond.

And worse, several days ago Harysen had felt obliged to abandon his raincoat. The constant drips and drops had rattled so obtrusively against the plastic coat that he'd stopped wearing it after he'd spotted the wild children. Now he was always wet. He hunkered close to the ground, soaked to the skin and freezing as he awkwardly tried to make his long, husky frame invisible amongst the rain-bejeweled vegetation.

Across a fog-shrouded clearing he could see the two children. He'd observed them often enough to overhear their names: Menoot and Ukra. They were perched high in a giant of a tree that had just reached full-

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flower. They waited, motionless and almost invisible amongst the bright orange blossoms, camouflaged by the cloaks they wore, fine cloaks woven of tens of thousands of feathers all dark green, gray and brown.

The children were hunting birds...or the things that passed for birds here. Nasty little four-legged, feathered reptiles. Miniature dinosaurs with bad dispositions. Avesaurs was what the park wardens called them. A few of them were capable of gliding, but none could really fly. The feathers were for warmth, or perhaps for courtship. Harysen wasn't sure. To him, the children were far more interesting.

A sharp squawk recalled his attention. A flock of bright orange birds no bigger than his fist had appeared in the lush green foliage of a neighboring tree. As Harysen watched, the flock of ten or twelve individuals scrambled through the dripping canopy and into the blossoming tree.

Instantly, an avesaurian cacophony descended upon the forest. The children had painted the tree's branches with a sticky resin. The little orange avesaurs were trapped in the goo. They squawked and screamed and flapped, their calls resounding off the canopy, the forest floor.

The little girl, Ukra, half-stood on her perch amongst the branches. She was probably about eight years old, no more. An ululation arose from her throat, and she skittered through the bobbing tree limbs, chasing the last few holdouts back to the area of sticky branches. One orange avesaur took off in a long glide to a neighboring tree. The others stuck.

The boy, Menoot, chirped in a kind of mocking imitation of his frantic prey. The tree branches dipped and swayed as he scuttled to the nearest orange bird. Menoot looked about ten, his long, coppery hair secured in a hundred skinny braids. His feather cloak made no rustle at all as he moved; it shifted on his back, utterly silent. He tossed one side of it over his shoulder. Underneath he wore brown leather breeches. His feet and chest were bare.

He dipped two fingers in a pouch that he wore at his waist, then he reached for one of the squawking, panicked birds. Grabbing its beak, he tucked it under its wing. Then he massaged its feet, rubbing a salve on the avesaur's clawed toes that dissolved the sticky resin and freed the frantic creature. Then Menoot picked it up and thoroughly cleaned its feet. He cradled it for a moment against his chest while his hand flicked rapidly across its back, almost too fast to follow, and then the bird was free,

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running off across the branches to disappear amongst the foliage. In the boy's fingers Harysen could just make out a small collection of orange feathers. These went into another pouch at Menoot's belt and then he moved on to another bird.

Only then did Harysen remember to take pictures. The camera lens wandered between the boy and his sister. The camera disk whirled. Then abruptly the image of Ukra and Menoot vanished from the viewfinder, to be replaced by an out-of-focus, dark brown field. Startled, Harysen looked up.

Standing in front of him was a short, wiry man, heavily bearded, with blue eyes and a dark complexion. Like the bird-catching boy, this man wore only leather breeches and a long feather cape. But his cape was of striking colors: crescents of electric blue rocking across a brilliant yellow field. And like the boy, his hair was fixed in tiny braids, though his were enlivened with strings of feathers to match the cloak. Harysen had never seen this man before, but knew he must be Menoot's and Ukra's father.

His gaze raked across Harysen — his inferior height and bulk seemed to trouble him not at all — and suddenly Harysen felt like a guilty adolescent rather than the self-assured artist who'd commanded the attention of society for over two decades. The bird catcher spoke: "Why have you come here?" he demanded. "And why are you harassing my children?"

Harysen felt a rush of surprise. The bird catcher's perfect English seemed at odds with the man's exotic appearance. But why? This man was no more native to Weyken than Harysen himself. He was a renegade, a runaway from the cities, a squatter living here in defiance of Congressional edicts that declared the very presence of human beings on natural worlds to be an illegal pollution.

Harysen rested a strong hand on his camera, resisting the instinctive urge to a combative response. "You've got it wrong, friend," he said in a low, rugged voice. "I'm no threat to your family. And I'd never let on to the park wardens you're here. I've come to work, that's all. I do sculpture — carvings in wood and bone."

"And you're on Weyken with permission, huh? A special man."

Harysen chuckled, determined to be agreeable. "The government let me come. I wanted to study nature — "

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"And with a whole planet full of nature, why did you make yourself our neighbor?"

Harysen scowled to cover a sudden surge of guilt. The bird catcher was right, of course. He'd built his house in this part of the forest because he'd wanted neighbors. He'd wanted to be close to the squatters, to watch them, to learn how they lived. Because the only part of nature that had ever really interested him was human nature. But such reasons would seem frivolous to this man. He stiffened, as he glimpsed a flicker of his own mortality in the bird catcher's eyes.

Suddenly, a startled shout sounded from the tree tops. The bird catcher spun around, his gaze fixed on his children. "Red-dragons!" the little girl cried. In a blur of motion the bird catcher disappeared up the nearest tree, climbing the rough-barked trunk with fingers and toes.

Harysen twisted around, his gaze scanning the tree tops. Three scarlet avesaurs were approaching through the canopy. From their nose to their hind legs they were as long as Menoot. Their short feathered limbs scrabbled through the branches, their black eyes flashed as they raced towards the captured flock of orange avesaurs. With their blocky snouts and decorative plumes they looked like miniature Chinese dragons armed with a heron's stabbing beak.

Harysen found himself running awkwardly across the forest floor, stumbling over roots and fallen branches. The children were in the dragons' path. And they weren't moving. "Get out! Get away!" Harysen shouted in a booming voice. But his warning was eclipsed by a tremendous roar from the tree tops, a predator's howl of rage.

The dragons stopped abruptly. The roar sounded again, and suddenly the red avesaurs switched directions and fled, disappearing within seconds into the dense foliage of the canopy. Harysen turned around, searching the branches for this new danger. But he saw only the bird catcher moving carefully towards his children.

Harysen leaned against a tree, his head down as he tried to catch his breath. When he looked up again, Menoot, Ukra, and their father were calmly freeing the captured flock of little orange avesaurs, carefully cleaning each member, while exacting as tribute a small wad of orange feathers. Together the family required only a few minutes to finish. Then they cleaned the tree branches and vanished into the canopy.

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* * *

Harysen sat in his living room, in the odd house he'd ordered built on the brink of a precipitous gully, cradling in his hand a glass of bourbon and water, no ice. He lived without refrigeration or air-conditioning. The entire planet of Weyken was an official wilderness, so the park wardens had decreed that the house must have no central power. The only machinery Harysen had been allowed were a few small shop tools, an electronic notebook and of course, the transit booth.

But Harysen counted the limited accommodations as one of Weyken's attractions. He'd grown tired of an environment programmed to address his every need; of an audience that adored everything he made, be it quality or crap. Something in him had longed to escape the absurd safety of society, to reach for the primitive: to be on his own, to warm his ration packs in a real fire, to breathe air generated by a living forest, to be close to the land and his own instincts — this was an experience he'd sought all his life.

He'd even let himself hope that Weyken would prove a cure for the strength-sucking sense of futility that had haunted him these past few years. Now he laughed at the thought. Weyken hadn't changed anything. He was play-acting here, and he knew it.

He gazed past the open glass doors to the patio, watching a small brown bird hop across the heavy vine that had climbed up the posts of his house. The vine twined about the covered patio, its heart-shaped leaves a lovely shade of spring green, its flowers like small beads of purple glass. The bird had woven a nest among the branches, and just this morning Harysen had counted three white eggs.

He thought about doing some work. His publicist had convinced a Congressional committee that this forest would inspire him — with its incredible diversity of life, with its magnificent selection of hardwoods. Special legislation had been passed allowing him to come here. Back in the world, expectations were high.

"I am the eyes of my age," he announced to the little bird that hopped about the twining vine, poking its head in and out amongst the leaves as it searched for insects. "My hands have made the art that will define this time in history."

The little brown bird remained wisely unimpressed, as was Harysen

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himself. He was a sculptor, that was all. And the work he'd done in the past mostly pleased him. But it was past, leaving always the question *what next*?

For almost a year, the answer had been *nothing*. His ex-wife had adopted the habit of chastising him daily. His agent had grown surly. The hoity-toity art crowd had begun to bid up the prices on his work in a slow-boiling round of speculation.

And then he'd read about Weyken. A few weeks later, to his profound surprise, he'd found himself with permission to go on an 'artist's retreat' on the uninhabited world — to become the only alien creature in a biological preserve that encompassed the entire planet.

Only later did he discover the squatters. His research turned up at least six groups in widely scattered locations throughout the southern cloud forest. The wardens seemed unaware of their presence. Harysen did nothing to enlighten them. But he did change the location of his house, because suddenly he was far more fascinated by the biological potential of his own species than by that of the entire ecosphere of a nearly unknown world.

LOOKING PAST the patio doors, Harysen toasted the antics of the small bird, then tossed back the last of the watered bourbon. It glissaded down his throat, leaving a trail of warmth that never quite seemed to reach his blood anymore. Shoving his chair back with a loud scrape, he stood, intending to put a few more pellets on the fire.

His eye caught a flash of color in the forest. He looked again, and saw the bird catcher stepping out from the vegetation beyond the patio, his bright blue and yellow cape glistening in the misty light.

"Well, well," Harysen muttered to himself, his surprise quickly evolving into caution as the bird catcher crossed the patio and entered the house.

The man was a head shorter than Harysen, but his sinewy shoulders left open the question of who held the advantage in strength. He fixed Harysen with a severe gaze. "Why have you been spying on my children?"

Harysen scowled. He really wasn't good at diplomacy. Still, he was determined to try. "The same reason they've been watching me, I expect.

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Simple curiosity. You know, they sometimes leave gifts of green wood for me on the forest floor where I'm sure to find them."

And in return Harysen had carved the kids a few toys — tiny avesaurs and spoons and abstract ornaments. He left the trinkets in the forest because the children refused to approach him.

"You've taken pictures of my children," the bird catcher accused. He started moving about the rustic living room.

Harysen watched him suspiciously. "The pictures are harmless," he said. "They're for my personal use; I won't publish them. And the wardens will never see them."

The bird catcher had found Harysen's electronic notebook. He picked it up, examined it for a moment, then strode with it from the living room into the hallway.

"Hey, wait a minute!" Harysen started after him. Oval windows looked out into the forest on either side of the passage. Then the hall opened up into the studio. On the workbench was a large battery-powered saw, lying amidst all the hand tools Harysen used in his work. The bird catcher's glance skipped over the saw before fixing on the dark, depthless door of the transit booth.

Then he was up the stairs, two at a time. Harysen abandoned the diplomatic approach. "That's my bedroom!" he roared, bounding after the man. "And this is my house. What are you after, anyway?" Harysen reached the top of the stairs and turned into the bedroom. A window-wall looked out over the gully and the gently falling rain.

The bird catcher stood silhouetted against the wall, his cape tossed back over his bare shoulders. "Where are the pictures?" he demanded.

Harysen nodded grimly. "All right. I'll concede the picture-taking was out of line. An invasion of your privacy." He walked to the cabinet and opened the door. The camera was on the shelf. He pulled the disk out of it, and turned that over to the bird catcher. "Destroy it if you like."

The bird catcher took the disk, slipped it into a pouch at his waist, then held out his hand. "And the rest of them?"

"What?"

"I'll take the rest of your disks — and the camera as well — just to be on the safe side."

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Harysen bridled. "I won't give you my camera. I need it for my work." He crossed his muscular arms over his chest.

With reptilian speed, the bird catcher stepped past Harysen, seized the camera from the cabinet shelf, then turned and flung it straight at the panel of rain-streaked glass. It struck the pane and shattered, while the glass resounded with a metallic wail. "The rest of the disks," the man said again. "I'll take them now."

Harysen studied the ruined camera. Then he looked back at the squatter and nodded slowly. He'd come here to learn, not to fight. "I'll get them for you."

The disks had fluttered like silver fish as they tumbled down, down the deep ravine, finally disappearing into a fog bank far below. The electric saw and notebook had followed, and then the small kit of power tools.

"Why did you come here?" the bird catcher asked again. Harysen scowled, feeling himself a hypocrite in the other man's eyes.

"Weyken is a living world. Listen to its rhythm, and you'll know your tech doesn't belong here."

"Nothing of us belongs here," Harysen growled. "We're all trespassers."

The bird catcher looked at him as if he were a rather unappetizing morsel. "Who decided that?" Then the man turned swiftly about and started down the path. "I will move my family," he called back over his shoulder. "And you will have an artist's perfect isolation."

Harysen sat up late into the night, bourbon in hand, staring out the open living room door to the vine-wrapped patio while the rain tapped and slid through the twining leaves. Now and then he heard a roar far off in the forest. Occasionally he heard a rustling in the brush nearby, and then he would stiffen, alert for danger. But no ravenous feathered dinosaur materialized, and he went back to his gloomy thoughts.

He must have nodded off eventually, because when he awoke, gray dawn was seeping through the clouds. He heard the crack of a stick, a soft giggle, the tapping of the rain. He sat up abruptly, the sounds echoing strangely in his memory, and he was suddenly unsure if he'd heard them at all, or if it had been the last remnant of a dream. He listened, his ears

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straining past the patter of the rain, his eyes searching the leafy face of the forest beyond his patio.

The giggle had belonged to the boy. He was almost sure of it. He stood slowly and walked to the open doorway. "Menoot?" he called gruffly. "Ukra? Are you there?" The children were like the birds they hunted — up at dawn and nowhere to be seen after sunset. He took a step farther. "There's no need to be afraid, Menoot. I'm your friend."

But there was no answer from the forest, and after fifteen minutes of patient waiting and calling he gave up, still uncertain if anyone had been near at all.

He was walking back across the stone-laid patio when his gaze was caught by three small white eggs on the ground. He bent and scooped them up, recognizing them as the eggs of the little brown bird nesting in the vine.

The shells were empty. Each one had been neatly pierced and sucked dry. He hissed in sudden anger. Had the children done this? Or some other creature? He started to fling them into the forest. But at the last moment he noticed the nest wasn't empty. There were still three eggs in it. But they were different — slightly smaller and light pink instead of white. The little brown avesaur was perched on the roof, staring at him anxiously. He tossed the white shells away and walked back into the house. By the time he had the fire up and breakfast heating, the foolish brown bird had settled contentedly on the adopted clutch of eggs.

It had been so long since he'd done any real work. And for most of a year that hadn't bothered him. But this morning he felt restless, and intensely bored. He went to his studio. The yawning door of the transit booth seemed vaguely threatening, so he turned his back to it, studying instead the shelf that held stumps and chunks of fallen trees that he'd gathered in the forest.

It was so damp here, it was hard to find a piece of wood that was fallen but not rotted. But he'd gotten a few chunks, the largest no bigger than his head. And the children had brought a few more. Someday soon he'd cut some green wood and haul it back to the studio to dry. Someday soon.

He ran his finger over the scavenged wood. The pieces ranged in color from blond to coppery red. He chose a honey-colored piece and took it to

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the workbench, then set himself on a stool and studied it for a while, letting it speak to him of its own nature. He smiled to himself as shapes began to move in a slow swirl through his mind. The wood was playing with him, giving him only glimpses of its soul. He couldn't see the final product yet, but he could see how to get there, so he took up a little hand saw and began to cut. A few grains of sawdust speckled the bench.

Something creaked behind him. A soft footstep on the floor. He jumped. The saw snapped out of his hand and clattered to the ground.

He whirled around to see a synthetic warden emerging from the depthless gray door of the transit booth. He glimpsed it for only a moment: a faceless, man-shaped figure of white ivory less than a meter high, still wet from the reproductive gel. Then its surface camouflage kicked in. Its skin mimicked the gray of the transit booth, the white of the walls, the green of the forest beyond the windows...an undefined blur of motion as it strode from the studio into the hallway.

Harysen suddenly remembered himself. "Stop right there!" he shouted after the retreating synth. "Where are you going? What business do you have here? I've requested no assistance. Come back here!" But the synthetic warden ignored him. It probably housed only a partial persona, just enough intelligence to execute its task.

Harysen abandoned his work to run after it, driven by a sudden, nasty fear. "Hey you!" he roared, following the synth out of the house. "Stop right now or I'll break you in two." But even as his words echoed across the ravine, the camouflaged synth vanished into the greenery of the forest.

Goddamn, if it's come for them.... Goddamn if it's found them.... I won't let it.... I can't let it.... Harysen's breath wheezed in and out past his throat in great, painful gasps as he trailed the nearly invisible synth through the forest. He wasn't used to moving at this pace. He kept tripping over rotten stumps or slipping on patches of mud and with every step he fell farther and farther behind. Finally, he stopped.

All he could hear was the ragged heaving of his own lungs. So he held his breath a moment. His heart boomed in his ears. Distant birds called. Rain pattered on leaves.

It occurred to him he had no idea where he was. Slowly he surveyed the ground around him, but footprints disappeared almost instantly in the

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spongy humus. He raised a trembling hand to wipe at the sweat and rain on his forehead. He told himself there could be many reasons why the synthetic warden had come. He told himself it was not his fault. He told himself lies.

If only he could warn the bird catcher's family. Surely with a few minutes warning they could disappear into the forest? The synth was stupid. It carried only a partial persona. The bird catcher could outwit it easily if only he had a few minutes warning....

Harysen let his head fall back and he yelled. He screamed. He howled until his throat was raw. *"Menoot! Ukra! Run away! A warden is here! Save yourselves! Run, run, run!"*

Finally, he gave up. The rain was falling harder now. He was soaked to the skin and starting to shake, not necessarily from the cold. He tried to collect himself. Down slope, he thought, recalling the topo map he'd explored with such pleasure when he'd been planning his stay on Weyken. *The bird catchers live down the slope from me.*

He carefully examined the forest around him and after a few seconds decided that there was a discernable slope. He started trotting slowly down hill, casting about for some kind of sign and after a while he found what might have been a footpath, though whether it had been made by human feet or by the scaled toes of some ground-dwelling avesaur he couldn't tell. He followed it anyway and eventually it brought him to a neatly constructed tree house mounted in the lower limbs of two forest giants. The house was made of thatch, and there was an abstract feather ornament of red and blue hung near the door. He thought he smelled wood smoke on the air, but the scent was coy in the rain.

"Hello?" he called tentatively. There was no answer. He climbed a ladder and looked inside the door. Embers glowed in the ash bed of a stone hearth. A slumped figure lay on the floor. Harysen hurried over to it, and crouched down.

It was the remains of a woman. The synth had used a bio-accelerator spray on her. Her body was crumbling into a sweet-smelling waxy brown heap that would be indistinguishable from soil in another few hours.

Harysen stood slowly and glanced through the rest of the house. There was little to see. Some sleeping pallets. Baskets of nuts hung near the fire where the heat would help keep mildew away. Fruit hung from the

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rafters. A half-completed green feather cloak stretched on a rack. A bright blue and yellow cloak thrown casually on the floor...the same cloak the bird catcher had worn. He stooped to pick it up, and discovered beneath it another rapidly decaying form.

He sank to the ground. His face pressed against the soft feathers of the cloak while his body shook in bouts of rage and grief.

It might have been near noon when thunder rumbled in the skies and the rain pushed itself to a new level of intensity. Harysen left then, taking the cloak with him. He climbed slowly down the ladder, keeping his gaze carefully raised so he wouldn't glimpse the bodies of Menoot and Ukra. Let the forest take them. They belonged to the forest.

He wandered aimlessly for a while, having no idea how to get home. He started imagining his own body as a decaying heap on the forest floor and he was honest enough to see the justice in that but nevertheless the idea didn't appeal to him. So he kept going.

Around mid-afternoon he was pushing tiredly through a head-high stand of some purple-flowering shrub when he almost stumbled into the deep abyss of the gully. He backpedaled in panic, staring at the misty depths of the cleft while his heart thudded in surprise. But after a moment, he realized he was no longer lost. If he followed the gulch upslope, he'd eventually come to his house. And so he did, late in the wet afternoon.

HE'D LEFT the patio doors open. As he entered the house he thought he saw a shadow pass swiftly up the hallway, but he heard nothing and when he checked through the house it was empty. He threw the blue and yellow cloak across his bed and thought sourly about the possibility of an avesaur lurking in a closet or behind a curtain. He went downstairs to close the patio doors.

But as he touched the handle he heard an odd hissing and a tiny moaning sound—a soft, high note of madness. He felt the hair on the back of his neck rise. His first impulse was to slam the doors tight and lock them. But it was such a tiny sound....

He stepped out onto the patio, into the gray light of late afternoon. The air was dank and the rain was drip-drip-dripping down on his already

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saturated clothes. The hiss and moan sounded again, and with a wash of relief he realized what it was. He approached the nest of the unassuming avesaur that had been cuckolded by another bird, and peered in.

The adopted eggs had hatched. There were three chicks in the nest and their beauty took his breath away. They were tiny, perfectly formed creatures much like Earthly cats but with long, sinuous necks, their bodies covered with iridescent feathers of green and blue. They hissed and moaned, while he smiled in delight.

Carefully, he picked one up, cradling it in his hands. It struggled to escape. He tried to calm it. He whispered to it as if it were a human baby. It swung its long neck around and sank its sharp beak deep into the thick flesh below his thumb. He yelped and dropped it quickly back into the nest while the rain washed a large droplet of blood from his hand. Silently, he berated himself. It was an avesaur. A savage, foul-natured bird. Not a source of comfort. Not a human thing.

He walked back into the house, stripped off all his clothes and left them in a heap by the patio doors, which he closed firmly. Then he found his packet of bourbon, went upstairs, crawled into bed and wept until the drink ferried him slowly into sleep.

When he awoke it was deep dark. The rain was pounding on the window of his bedroom, rattling menacingly against the glass. And over the sound of the rain he heard other noises downstairs. Voices? Just on the edge of hearing.

He strained to catch the words, but the harder he listened, the fainter the sound grew.

He shivered, knowing he should never have come here. If he'd stayed away, the park wardens never would have noticed the squatters.

But he'd come, intent on observing the squatters' lives...as if those lives were a performance that he could admire or revile. Now the players had vanished, their existence shattered by the simple fact of his presence. His simple presence.

It seemed very cold this night. He reached out to pull a blanket around his bare skin.

But his hand encountered feathers. He yanked his hand back in shock, expecting a sharp beak to snap at his fingers. The voices had faded. Only

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the sound of the rain was left. He reached out again, tentatively this time, and laid his hand on the feathered cloak. He pulled it slowly up to his chin. It slid across the bed without making a sound.

But as he closed his eyes, a resounding blow hit the roof of the house. *Boom!* Right over his head. He ducked instinctively, his heart drumming and his fingers cold as the whole structure of the house shook with the impact. He waited for a second blow, but a minute passed and there was nothing but the fluid grumble of a rogue wind in the gully.

Outside the window, the darkness was easing. He could make out shapes and silhouettes, the familiar outlines of the landscape beyond the glass.

With a mental effort he put away his fears — didn't dispose of them! — just put them away for the moment. He dressed, then wrapped himself in the feather cloak, feeling oddly grand and foolish. Then he went outside to investigate the damage to his roof.

A tree branch had fallen on the house. He laughed when he saw it, chiding himself for his night terrors. It wasn't even a large branch, though it was heavy. The broken end shone white in the gray morning light with the brilliance of fresh bone. Where had it come from? He tipped his head back, noting the forest giant that had dropped it. He could see the break — a white tear in the trunk of a slender tree that towered nearly a hundred feet over his head.

A gift, he thought. This is a gift from the forest. And he felt stricken, as an old, almost forgotten sensation slid into his arms, his fingers. A restless, murmuring wind in his blood demanding that he work.

Loathing himself, he bent down to examine the wood, wondering if he dare carve it while it was still green. His soul felt as dark as a rain-filled night. A family had died because of him. But his art was reborn.

The wood was the hardest, most beautiful, whitest wood he'd ever seen. Like ivory, like bone. His blades touched it, scraped it, shaping and sawing across a grain so fine it was almost invisible. And gradually, as the day passed, a composition emerged from the wood.

At dusk he sat back to examine it. He was ravenously hungry, his eyes were aching and his bladder was painfully full. But he stared at the object, surprised at what he saw.

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It was a fluid, abstract image of a couple embracing, sharing a passionate kiss that implied a solid union, that promised children. And they were dressed in feathered capes, feathers twined in their hair. It was beautiful. It pleased him as nothing he'd made before ever had. He studied it in wonder, thinking he would send it back through the transit booth, show his agent, his ex-wife, let them know his career wasn't finished yet —

Feathers shook behind him. Coarse, rattly feathers. Claws scraped on the studio floor.

Harysen spun around to see a red dragon crouched in the doorway. It looked huge in that enclosed space, glaring at him with wicked black eyes. It reared up on its hind legs, the long talons of its forepaws rattling against each other with a sound like rain on glass. Then it dove at him.

Using its beak as a spear, it jabbed at his face. It raked at him with its talons. He screamed and fell back against the wood rack. The dragon bounded after him, its beak stabbing at his eyes. He slapped it away.

It came at him again. Its beak struck the back of his hand. Blood spurted from the wound. He howled in rage and kicked at the dragon. It fluttered back a few steps. He looked up, just as a second dragon launched itself at him from the studio window.

He raised his hands to shield his face. The avesaur's body struck him. Its beak stabbed at his throat. He cried out, and whirled away.

From the corner of his eye he saw the first bird, stabbing fiercely at his sculpture. Meanwhile, a third individual and a fourth had appeared at the window. Coarse scarlet feathers rustled, rattled. They launched their attack.

He ducked to the floor, beating back the flock of dragons with his hands. Blood was running freely from his scalp when he caught sight of the feather cloak. It hung from the stool where he'd tossed it when he'd started carving that morning.

Now he grabbed it; yanked it down on the floor beside him. The unexpected motion seemed to startle the dragons. They backed off for a second. Long enough for him to find his feet. Then he was running. Flashing past the oval windows of the hallway, through the living room, exploding past the patio doors, the cape waving along behind him.

At the edge of the forest he paused a moment to glance back over his

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shoulder. There were at least a dozen more of the red dragons moving in the trees overhead, descending on his house.

He spent the night in the forest, surrounded by the utter darkness, by the voices of the night creatures. He huddled under a fern frond, not far from the house, wrapped in the feather cloak. The rain fell against the feathers and rolled away without touching him. The night moved slowly forward. The forest voices changed. But Harysen continued to sit.

His injuries were superficial, but they still hurt. He was thankful for the cloak. It was a skin that kept him dry and warm through the lightless night. That kept him alive, he thought. He wondered at the art that had gone into making it. How had squatters from the cities learned to make an object at once so beautiful and functional? Where eons of evolution would have been required to shape a similar adaptation in any other creature, these squatters had done it in less than one generation. And he'd destroyed them.

Are we a form of pollution? he wondered. The bird catchers had never ravished the forest. Given: a new world and a few humans to occupy it. What would the result be after a thousand generations?

The park wardens insisted any human interference would spoil a world and leave it an environmental hell. But Harysen wasn't so sure. Might it be possible to slip into a new world as quietly as a graft that only made a tree stronger? Was it fair to the squatters to pre-judge the outcome? Was it fair to the forest not to?

Harysen dozed and woke and dozed some more until dawn light finally started to filter through the forest canopy. When there was enough light to see by, he crawled out from under the fern and stood. His legs and back were horribly stiff and he felt light-headed from lack of food. Yet he knew too little about the forest to forage for a meal. If he wanted something to eat, he'd have to reclaim his house.

He stretched and caught a few drops of rain on his tongue and then he set off in the direction of home. It wasn't far. He'd made sure last night that he wouldn't get lost. So after a minute or two he was standing behind the last screen of vegetation, studying the house.

The patio doors hung open. The morning sun probed the interior, illuminating rent sofas and torn rugs. Ashes had been kicked out of the

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fireplace and lumps of bird crap sullied the floor or dripped in obscene smears on the walls. The destruction appalled him. It had the aspect of a conscious attack against his person, his life. He told himself that was ridiculous. But he had to swallow hard against an ugly knot of superstitious fear.

He waited and watched for some twenty minutes but saw no sign of activity, so finally he moved cautiously towards the house. His bare feet squished in the mud, then he stepped out onto the patio. He peered into the house. Broken glass shimmered in the hallway where some of the oval windows had been shattered. A few red feathers were scattered across the floor. But the house seemed silent, empty.

A sudden chittering overhead made him jump. He looked up to see the little brown avesaur that lived in the vine. Its head poked down through the leaves as it challenged him, seemingly ready to launch itself at his face. He stepped back in pained surprise. What was going on? The little creature had never minded his presence before.

He glanced at the nest. Then he turned around to take a closer look. The nest was gone! Not just empty, but gone. The beautiful baby avesaurs — he imagined them being eaten by the red dragons and the thought sickened him. The brown bird raced down the vine, snapping and cursing at him. He retreated into the house.

He heard the voices again as he went up the hallway. There could be no doubt this time. He stepped carefully past the broken glass, his heart hammering in his ears. Then he looked in the studio.

It was in worse shape than the living room. Everything had been knocked over and destroyed, the windows broken. He saw the sculpture he'd made yesterday. It was lying upside down in a corner, severely pecked, looking like a disfigured honeycomb. No trace of the original design remained. Fury ran through his brain, but stopped short when he caught sight of the children.

They were crouched in front of the depthless gray door of the transit booth. Both were shirtless, dressed only in brown leather breeches. Their camouflage capes were cast back over their shoulders. The girl, Ukra, had her coppery hair bound up in a huge fluffy pony tail on the top of her head. Menoot still wore his countless tiny braids. They had the little brown avesaur's nest on the floor between them.

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One of the three adopted chicks was missing.

Ukra glanced over her shoulder at Harysen. "What is this?" she asked, indicating the transit booth. "We saw that little hiding man disappear here. Did Mom and Dad go with it?"

Harysen felt his throat knot up. She must have seen the crumbling mounds of organic matter in her home. But why should she recognize those as her mother and father?

Menoot was staring intently at the transit booth's blank door. He put his hand in; watched it disappear. Withdrew it and watched it reappear. Then he picked up one of the two remaining hatchlings and inserted it into the door.

"Here! Don't do that!" Harysen cried. Too late. The boy withdrew his hand, and the chick was gone.

"Where did it go?" he muttered. He reached in and groped around, but his hand emerged empty. He coiled it into a fist and glared at Harysen. "Where's our Mom and Dad?"

Harysen glanced at the transit booth's control panel. It was set for the capitol city, probably the warden's headquarters. He leaned forward, his hand twitching nervously. The children were squatting right in front of the door. With one step he could grab them and fling them through. In a few days they'd be reconstituted in the city, where the authorities would see to it they were properly cared for. Yes. That was the thing to do. It would be best for them. What hope did they have here?

The little girl watched him with wide eyes, the feathers in her hair moving minutely in a stray current of air. Who could predict the outcome? Harysen wondered.

He yielded his advantage and squatted on the floor, face-to-face with the kids. They didn't belong in the city any more than the avesaurs.

"Your parents are gone," he said softly. "They can't come back."

"They're dead, aren't they?" Menoot asked. "My dad told me this might happen."

Harysen nodded gravely. Ukra began to cry. He offered her his arms and she came to him, her decorative feathers tickling his chin, her tears warm against his chest. Her hair smelled of the forest. He breathed in the scent. It filled him; warmed him; left him briefly terrified. His arms tightened around her.

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"We have to go away," he said hoarsely, astonished at how easily the decision had been made. "Maybe we can find some of the other people who've settled in this forest."

The boy gazed at him with steely eyes. "Will the hiding man come for you too?"

Harysen considered this. "I'm here with permission. But the wardens will look in on me. If I disappear they might even look for me...unless they believe I'm...."

He was thinking about the white wood, and how smooth and hard it felt, so much like bone. "If they found human bones they'd have to assume I was dead. They might not even bother to confirm whether the bones were real or not." The boy looked at him with puzzled eyes.

"Will you help me learn the forest?" Harysen asked. Menoot nodded slowly. "And I'll help you to learn — " But what could he offer, really? Guidance? History? Seasoned wisdom? The opinions of other worlds? That all seemed of small value here. Maybe it was enough to offer the simple evidence that children grew up into adults.

He set the girl on her feet and kissed her on the cheek, then he retrieved the remains of his sculpture. He showed it to the kids. "Do you know where I can get more of this white wood?"

Ukra flushed red and ducked her face. Menoot looked stricken. "You want to call the red dragons back?" he asked.

"What?"

"The red dragons always come to the white wood," Ukra said, looking up. "Mom says when the wood's cut, it has a smell. The smell's the same whether beetles damage the wood, or people cut it."

"And the red dragons come to eat the beetles," Harysen concluded for her. "Then this wood was a gift from you?"

To Harysen's surprise, he saw tears start in Menoot's eyes. "We wanted you out of the house," he said, his voice high and uneven. "We wanted to see if Mom and Dad, if — We're sorry."

"It's all right," Harysen said.

"You carved the wood," the girl said. "The smell of it was everywhere. The birds went a little crazy. We didn't mean to wreck your whole house."

"It's all right," Harysen repeated. "I don't expect I'll be living here much longer. Can you get me the white wood?"

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Menoot nodded miserably.

Weeks later, when the wardens finally sent a synth to look in on Harysen, all that was found of him were a few broken pieces of skull and mandible, both thoroughly pecked.

The wardens were secretly pleased to be rid of this alien infestation, and they moved quickly to ensure that another would not occur. Before any higher authority could interfere, they ruled the death as accidental, sprayed the house with a bio-accelerator and destroyed the transit booth. Once again, Weyken was a closed world.

Back in the cities the art community decided that Harysen's work was worth at least ten times any previous estimates. While in the forest, the rhythms of life began to change.

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Robin Wilson's most recent novel is a mystery, Death by Degrees. *His most recent non-fiction book is a sequel to his well-received 1973 SF text-anthology,* Those Who Can. Those Who Can II *appeared from St. Martin's Press late last year.*

He makes a welcome return appearance to F&SF *with "Faster than a Speeding Bullet."*

Faster than a Speeding Bullet

By Robin Wilson

WHAT JOSHUA FEINEMAN invented back in '02 was a sly little shortcut of a subroutine that programmers and other code-cutters who communicate mostly in Prolog or C++, with an occasional lapse into Lisp or such vulgates as FORTRAN or APL, called, simply, nifty.

Josh's colleagues in the Mathematical Physics Department called it elegant, which, Josh thought, had to be the only term of art common to interior decorators and scientists. Then he recalled the "charm" of the high-energy physicists.

"*Invented* isn't really the right word," Josh told Rainey Clarke one August night four years later during a quiet moment in their busy fumble from a relationship based on exuberant sex into a love based on a complex skein of feelings, opinions, prejudices, mutual kindnesses and psychological mysteries which they had come to believe was worth spending the rest of their lives exploring. "*Discovered* is what I did," he said.

"And that's how come you're so rich?" said Rainey. She abandoned her skyward gaze at the last of the evening's Perseids and burrowed down into the

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twin sleeping bag they shared in the cold Sierra night and bit Josh gently on the shoulder.

"That's how...ouch!...come," he said, rolling over and wrestling Rainey to an uncontested cross-body pin, his hands locking her arms, elbows akimbo, in parentheses around her oval face and its frame of auburn curls. "That's why now that I've got you my cup runneth damn near over."

"What do you mean, got me? What do you mean, damn near?"

He stared down at her grinning face, her eyes bright in the clear high-country starlight, one heavy brow cocked in the skepticism with which, he had come to realize, she greeted the good things in her life. And then he kissed her. Since they had known each other for six months, been lovers for half that time, been three days hiking the Pacific Crest Trail, had spent a busy hour in the sleeping bag earlier that night and the past two hours gazing in awe at the August display of meteorites, it was the kind of lingering kiss that saluted the complexities ahead more than the simple urgencies of the past.

Josh rolled onto his back and caught one late flash across the sky. Rainey asked, "Okay, Joshua me lad, what do you mean about your cup? Am I not your perfect love? And how rich are you? Are you New Century Genentech rich? You '90's rich? Sam Walton Rich? Up there with the Golden Gates?"

"Nah."

"'80's rich? Trump rich? Up there with the S&L barons?"

"Look, all I did was figure out a quick little way of doing something. Maybe a bunch of people don't have to hit a couple of back slashes anymore. Maybe a lot of them only hit the dot on a keyboard when they want a period or a decimal point. No big thing."

"Ah," said Rainey, slyly readying herself to counterattack. "But however modest your contribution to — what'd you tell me, practically every operating system? — someone keeps paying you big bucks to use it, right? You gotta be some kind of a genius."

"Yeah. Well I'm not. I was drunk, sitting around getting pissed with three of my grad students. I'd broken the little finger on my left hand playing third base in a dumb pickup game at the department picnic that afternoon and it was all splinted up and I was full of Demerol and scotch after we stopped off there in Piggotti's on the way back from the emergency room, which is this little bar about a mile down Fresno Avenue from the campus, and I was somehow convinced that I was gonna lose the goddamn thing, my finger, and

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I started to count them with This Little Pig Went to Market and I only got up to four, the one who got none. I figured in a symmetrical world I'd have to whack off the same finger on the other hand so's they'd, you know, match, and that started me thinking in octal and the first thing I knew I was saying, son of a bitch, that's it." Josh paused for breath.

"And?"

"And I was just barely sober enough to write it down on a cocktail napkin. Been the little finger on my right hand, nothing would've come of it 'cause I can't write shit left handed. So it's all just dumb luck."

With Josh busy in memory, Rainey attacked, rolling swiftly on top of him and pinning him, the action again only lightly contested, and she returned the kiss, hers only a little less complex, a little more basic. When they came up for air, she rolled back to cuddle against his chest and said, "Okay, if you're so rich, how come you ain't smart?"

"Ah," he said. "If you're so beautiful and witty and kind and courteous and obedient and loyal and — I forget the rest of that Boy Scout crap — how come you're inside an L. L. Bean sleeping bag 4,000 feet up in a frosty meadow thirty miles south of Lake Tahoe wrapped around a skinny naked thirty-something beardy professor of mathematics from a fairly undistinguished new university who has always been a hell of a lot luckier at cards than at love?"

"Money, honey," said Rainey, now sleepy.

"I thought so."

"And watch it with that 'obedient' stuff."

"Yes ma'am."

A little later, almost asleep, Rainey mumbled, "So you're rich an' I'm your love 'n your cup still i'n't full, huh?"

"Not quite. Close."

"Whatcha want you haven't got?"

Josh was a long, thoughtful moment replying, and when he finally did so, Rainey was slipping over the edge of sleep.

"Want to get back to doing some good," he said, "without buying it."

Among the night's Perseids was the hulk of one of five Command-and-Control vessels of a fleet of nearly a thousand starships launched at a time unthinkably long ago in the second punitive campaign of an intergalactic

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entity whose name is inexpressible. Its microbiotic crew long reduced to nanometric motes, its strange, organic fabric tenuous, the minuscule remaining mass of the C-and-C produced little flash as all but its intricate and indestructible prime mover vaporized in the lower stratosphere. That tiny remaining solid core of long-dormant sub-atomic energies and relativistic control synapses slowed, cooled, cycled upward and downward in an early morning west-bound thunderhead, just another hygroscopic kernel of dust, and — when it had accumulated the necessary mass of ice — plunged in precipitation. It struck just hard enough to break skin, penetrating some fraction over a millimeter, twice its diameter, into the nape of a sleep-fuddled camper on the Pacific Crest Trail.

Josh woke, slapped, grumbled "goddamn mosquitoes," and burrowed down out of the first few drops of rain into the warm, dry double bag, spooning.

The prime mover, suddenly bathed in a rich broth of free ions and proximate to all sorts of ambient energy, powered back up into operation, went through a self-diagnosis that took the better part of one revolution of the planet that now bore it and its new vessel, found all in order, and settled into standby mode to wait for instructions, prepared to accept them couched in almost any intelligible signal.

Fifteen years earlier, in the last month of her senior year at Jefferson High, Rainey had thought she knew the three things that would fill *her* cup: marriage to some really cool and studly dude like Chuck Bingham, a neat little kid like her four-year-old nephew Petey, and a good career in something major, like maybe fashion merchandising or even modeling.

"Same three I still want," she said to Detective Sergeant Amanda Forburg, a high school friend she had seen only rarely over the previous decade, who was paying her an unexpected visit in her tiny lab in the Jefferson County Sheriff's Office on the afternoon after her return from the Pacific Crest.

"Got the cute little kid," she said, "only he's almost fourteen years old and worried about making it in a mean school and otherwise a serious, industrial-strength pain in the ass, which is to say he is a thirteen-year-old kid."

"Yeah, know about the kid," said Sergeant Forburg. "And you got the career, I mean, like, Chief of Criminalistics even in a jerkwater place like Jeff County, that's not too shabby, Rainey."

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"I guess. Two techs and a contract M.E. who comes in on call. No big deal but it probably beats modeling. I was too big in the butt anyway."

"And the third thing?" said Forburg. "The great love affair?"

"Yeah. Had that too. For a while. But we were too young and Chuck — you remember Charlie Bingham? — he wasn't done screwing around, and when I caught him at it, I was too young to deal with it. Probably still am."

"Caught him, like, *in flagrante*?" said Forburg, who — with a degree in Criminal Justice — had a taste for legalisms.

"More like in Florence," said Rainey. "You remember Flo Anderson? She was one of my best friends in high school."

Forburg grinned. "One thing us gays learn is that when you grow up, lover and best friend better be the same thing."

"Yeah, but you don't have a patent on the idea. Anyway, you asked about what I been up to since we graduated. I did that stuff and then the Police Corps and college when they finally funded it and here I am. How about you, Mandy?"

"I guess I could say like my mom used to, been there, done that," said Forburg. "Only no kid, and after the guy hauled ass, I began to understand who I really was. Did a deuce in the Army. MPs. Wasn't asked, didn't tell. Got out after the Irish Pacification thing in '01 and went to Sac State with a GI grant. Hired in at Jeff City PD in '04 and took the Sergeant's exam last year."

"You married?"

"Yeah. Mary Alice is manager of the Penney's over in Hillsborough." Forburg's grin was beatific. "But how about you, Rain? Ever find a replacement for your — ah — studly dude?"

"Wasn't that something? Can you imagine the words we used? But, yeah. I think so. Got one kind of on hold."

"He in law enforcement?"

"Professor. Great guy. I think I'm nuts about him. Think he's nuts about me."

"So?"

"So, thing is, we've got some — uh — problems we got to work through."

"He doesn't get along with the kid? You not sure you like him enough to make it permanent?"

"No. No doubts there in either. It's just that he's like the rest of us, took one bad fall in the marriage department and he's, like, kind of gun-shy." She

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laughed to cover her concerns. Why was she telling Mandy all this? Something about old friends not seen for a long time....

"And then, more important," Rainey continued. "he's lousy rich, lots of bucks, and I'm not sure I know how to handle that."

Forberg laughed. "You'll get used to it. Trust me."

Rainey nodded. "Yeah, I think I will, but it takes some thinking. I don't want to give up all this." She waved her hand to encompass three hundred square feet of peeling vinyl floor tile, the battered metal furniture loaded with paper and abused apparatus, the scabrous green walls. "And he's got kind of another problem too."

"They usually do, don't they. What? Stumbled on the twelfth step and still falls on his ass Saturday nights? Steals ladies' panties from the Laundromat?"

Rainey's smile displayed a bride's mix of current joy and anticipated concern. "Nothing that simple. Says he wants to — uh — do some good in the world. Be a hero or something. Not just give money away, which he does a whole lot."

"Wow," said Forburg, irony in her voice. "Rich *is* a problem."

They sat in silence for a moment, sobered by memory. Then Rainey — seeing Forburg fidget, suddenly prescient, frightened, her throat tightening — said, "So, Mandy. What brings you around after all these years?"

Forburg had trouble making eye contact. "Rainey. I'm sorry I'm the one has to do this, but the boss figured it might come better from a — uh — friend. What I'm doing right now is working on another problem you got."

"Oh shit," said Rainey, her heart sinking. "Tommy?"

Forburg opened her over-the-shoulder, removed a plastic evidence bag, and placed it with a dull clunk on Rainey's scarred desk. It contained one of the shabby Chinese ripoffs of the Smith & Wesson Model 911 9mm that had inundated American streets in the previous two years, one of many unanticipated benefits of the inclusion of the People's Republic of China in GATT II. "Weapons sweep this morning at Broadmoor Middle School turned up a couple dozen of these. Took this one off one Thomas Jay Bingham, NOK listed as Rainey Clarke."

"Oh goddamn!" said Rainey, tears of fear and frustration welling in her eyes.

Josh noticed the difference when he rose just before noon on the day after their long drive back from the Mokelumne Wilderness and the detour

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through Modesto to pick up Rainey's son from her sister's home. They had parted after midnight, Rainey giving him a chaste peck on the cheek as Tommy sleepily grumbled his way through the front door of the two bedroom condo he shared with his mother.

The difference Josh noticed was that when he gave his habitual hard jerk on the shower stall door that had been stuck and he had been meaning to fix since some time back in the Clinton administration, the door shattered with a rattling vitreous cascade like the sound the trash recycling truck wakes you with when it picks up in front of your house the Monday after a party weekend. Startled, he stood naked and shivering, harmless fragments of tempered glass piled on his feet, the aluminum door frame twisted like a bizarre paper clip. Broken free of the assembly, the round aluminum handle rested quietly, warmly, in his hand.

His mathematician's keen analytical mind went, huh?

Aloud, with professorial precision, he said, "Holy shit!"

Bemused, intrigued, he stepped gingerly around the ruins, showered, dressed, and swept up, replaying that single strange moment again and again, looking for some explanation better than, huh? As he pondered, he prepared and consumed a brunch of crackers, elderly cheese, and cold cereal and milk. He moved gingerly, very careful when he pried open the milk carton's spout and applied knife to hardened Edam.

Time for a little experimental verification. He stepped into the garden behind his modest suburban house — a souvenir of his brief unpleasant marriage back in '96 — and picked up the first disposable object he saw, a whitewashed rock the size of his fist, one of many edging a neglected bed of Allium. He pictured himself playing third base, scooping up a baseline grounder and trying to throw out that hulking sonofabitch in Condensed Matter at second, about the distance from where he stood to the stout grapestake fence that marked the rear of the lot. He threw. Flat and swift, the rock thudded into and through the back fence. A little more than a second later a mature oak over in the next block shivered and shook leaves and birds from its crown.

Josh whistled a long exclamation. He grubbed up another rock and lofted it over a neighbor's house toward the gray outline of the coast range forty miles away in the direction of Coalinga. Without perceptible trajectory, it diminished to a cobblestone, a pebble, a grain of sand, and disappeared. He

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picked up a third stone and reduced it to sand without throwing it, squeezing it in his hand.

How can flesh and blood...? he wondered, and then realized that there had been only superficial contact between M. Joshua Feineman and any of the stones, that something in or around Josh was doing the work, handling the abrasion, exerting the force, impelling the objects. Not Josh himself.

He whistled again, pulled a battered aluminum fungo bat from the canvas sack of gear he kept inside the back door and thrust it down into hard soil up to its grip, pulled it back out again, and bent it double.

Rich *and* fucking powerful too! His mind filled with visions of Spandex-clad Marvel Comics superheroes from his youth.

He heard the phone in the kitchen ring and went in to answer it, the twelve -year-old in him that is the default persona in most men making him swagger a little but the rest of him walking on eggs, mindful of the screen door, which had a tendency to stick on damp days.

THE TELEPHONE call brought a distracted, uncharacteristically self-absorbed Josh to a tiny mud-colored waiting room in the Family Support Division of the Jefferson County District Attorney's Office where Rainey embraced him wordlessly and thanked him with wounded eyes. They sat together on a hard bench until a uniformed deputy led in Tommy, his wrists joined in front of him with plastic ties more to humiliate than to restrain him. They waited then, Rainey between the two people she most loved and least understood, until they could be interviewed by the Assistant Prosecutor who handled juvenile cases.

Rainey could not remember ever feeling such dismay. First the recurrent problem with Tommy — God only knew how that would turn out — and now Josh was acting weird, twitchy, distant. She had called, asked him to accompany her through the painful process ahead, not because she needed support — she had too long been a successful single parent to lose heart now — but because she feared for Tommy and his failing adjustment to the violent society of the public schools.

Not a gender thing, she thought. A generation thing. Schools had been rough enough when she was a teenager, scary sometimes, but not...Christ!...*perilous, deadly!* She wanted Tommy to have some touch-

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stone to the new schoolboy reality that he faced, that she felt inadequate to counsel him on. Maybe a teacher, even a college professor, could help. Josh's willingness to support her was, she knew, limitless. The best friend she had ever had. Maybe skinny, kindly, intellectual, pedantic, comic, loving Joshua Feineman could give something to her tough little boy, whose attitude toward his mother's lover — typically enough — had thus far peaked at grudging tolerance.

She peered at her tall, sullen son from the corner of her eye. He looked ordinary enough, dressed in the teen uniform of the day. His battered Styrofoam cyclist's helmet, pushed back on his head at a precise angle, was covered with swastikas and garish daggers in the virulent pinks and blues of the tattoo artist. An oversize whiteGuayaberra shirt fell halfway to his knees over electric chartreuse cyclist's tights swallowed in scuffed vinyl high toppers. No more bizarre, she supposed, than the reversed baseball caps, topiary haircuts, and sagging skateboard baggies worn by her teenage brother and his friends a dozen years earlier.

The Assistant Prosecutor was a large frazzled black woman named Tamara Shakul who, only four years out of Hastings Law School, had already built a reputation for dealing with kids in trouble. Rainey had worked up the forensics for her on several cases; they knew and respected each other.

"What we got," said Shakul, seating them in her office and acknowledging the adults but addressing Tommy, "is a violation of California Penal Code Section 12101, Possession of a Concealable Firearm by a Minor. That's any usable handgun. You know what I'm telling you Thomas?"

Rainey's hand found one of Tommy's, squeezed hard. "Uh, yes..." Squeezed again. "...ma'am."

Shakul nodded and continued, her language an expressive mix of legalisms and street lingo. "Okay, you know from last time you were in here that's a misdemeanor that can get you jugged up to a year in a boot camp if you're lucky with the judge or in Juvenile Hall if you're not. You follow me? You know what I'm sayin'?"

No hand squeeze was necessary. Tommy was frightened. "Yes, ma'am."

"Thing is," she continued. "They wrote the law with kids like you in mind and they put a little wiggle room in it. You get the first one free if no felony is involved, nobody did anything with the piece. It's the second one and any subsequent ones gets you the time in the slammer."

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Tommy swallowed.

"And you used up your first one last March, didn't you?"

Tommy nodded. Got the hand squeeze. Said, "Yeah. Yes ma'am."

"So this time is number two and you will, I repeat, you *will* do some time."

Shakul removed the automatic from the evidence bag, ejected the clip and with casual expertise worked the slide and sighted to make sure the chamber was clear. She laid the weapon on her desk in front of Tommy. "I'm not goin' to ask you where you got this. Not goin' to ask you to rat on any of your little buddies. I know how you kids think, rather do time than roll on whoever sold you this. But I want to have this interview with you in front of your mom, let you know how the law sees what you're gettin' into. Give you a chance to think about it. Maybe work up somethin' you can use with the judge, get a little break here 'cause your mom's in law enforcement."

Her voice grew brusque, more commanding. "The way the law gonna figure this, either you bought this piece of cheap Chinese shit 'cause you goin' to use it in what the law calls 'pursuit of an unlawful act,' like knock over a 7-Eleven or pop somebody been givin' you a hard time. In which case I got nothin' more to say to you and I'll see you later when they drag your sorry ass in here again on a felony rap or on the third misdemeanor, which they absolutely, positively, most certainly will eventually do." Her voice rose to a swallowed shout, like an umpire calling the third out in a late inning. "Count on it!"

Then in a quiet, confiding tone: "Or what's more likely with kids like you that've got folks who care for 'em and look after 'em is that you're scared 'cause about every other kid in school and especially the losers and dealers are carryin', and that's why you think you need some kinda protection. In which case, I'm telling you in front of your folks that this damn thing is no kind of protection at all and that the best way of gettin' your head blown off is to walk around with one of these in your pocket."

They sat in silence. Rainey was horrified. She stared at the sweat on her son's pale forehead. It seemed only yesterday that she had seen the same sweat as the petulant mouth below it worked at her breast. She was startled then when Josh, strangely calm and surprisingly authoritative, reached across to pick up the pistol. He examined it, running a thumb and forefinger up the barrel in a gesture that was almost lascivious, pausing at the muzzle as if to gauge its width, and then held it up for Tommy to see.

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"Tom," he said, his voice steady, low-key, a touch of the classroom demonstrator in it, "take a look at the barrel. See that? Can you see how the muzzle on this thing is so far out of round it's practically squeezed shut?"

Rainey thought: He knows what he's doing. I can see why everybody says he's a good teacher. He talks to Tommy without sounding patronizing.

Josh bent his head next to Tommy's; both fixed their attention on the matte black of the automatic as if it were a toy locomotive, an airplane model, a circuit board. "What do you think?" said Josh. "Looks to me like somebody whacked it with maybe a sledge hammer."

Tommy nodded soberly.

"Anyone try firing this puppy, it'd blow up in their face and they'd lose most of a hand and probably a lot of other stuff too, don't you think?"

Tommy nodded again, a physician concurring with a first opinion.

"Not a usable firearm, Tom. Wouldn't think it'll count for a second misdemeanor. But still not a good idea to carry something like this around, is it."

Tommy said, "No sir."

Rainey looked up at Shakul. The Assistant Prosecutor was slowly nodding, every bit as surprised as the boy by the unfireable condition of the gun.

Different purpose this trip into the high Sierra a week after the first one; three individual sleeping bags around embers in a fire ring in Troy Meadows, the Sequoia National Forest.

It had been a great day, thought Tom Bingham as he squirmed into his bag for the night. Great week. Josh had some neat moves, stuff he did that was hard to figure. Like what he'd done with that 9mm he'd bought from Sean that he wished he'd never seen. Got him off the hook with the cops. Never again!

And Josh was more fun than most grown-ups, listened to stuff and understood what you were trying to say. Knew all kinds of shit too, could explain major stuff like rocks and stars and kinds of trees so it was real interesting, knew how to, like, *deal* with things.

He imagined when he got home what he would tell Pinky and Scott about the time that morning he finally asked Josh how come they could talk together, do stuff together like he couldn't with other adults.

"I'm, like, is it one of those guy kinda things?" he would tell them. "And Josh, he's my mom's squeeze, he goes, Nah, what they call guy stuff is really

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boy stuff. And then Josh, he says: cool people outgrow that crap." Tom's daydream descended into night and he drifted off into a sleep undisturbed by the raw, visceral fear that had been his constant companion since his last year in elementary school.

Rainey had a mother's sense for her child, knew when he had dropped into sleep. She rose far enough out of her bag to lean across to kiss Josh quickly and feel his response, his hand on the back of her head. Snuggling back into warmth, she thought: I got the career and I got the dude and I got the kid, and maybe with Josh to help, he isn't going to be as much of a problem as I thought. And yes, I can deal with the bucks, although there is something about old Joshua-me-love that is different....

Josh smiled at the kiss, wondered how he was going to deal with what was happening to him but feeling new confidence in his relationship with Rainey and the boy. It had been a weird week, to say the least. At night and in private moments in his locked garage and alone on the trail earlier that day, he had done some more experimenting. He had leapt higher than all sorts of things, sped amazingly, and heaved great weights in astonishing ways. But at best — like the thing with the 9mm — these were just parlor tricks, sometimes requiring unusually large parlors. They were like the money; nice to have but not all that interesting to use....

In a flash of self-awareness he was not introspective enough to recognize as such, he realized that his cup was truly running over now, not on account of Rainey's love or parenting her boy or being rich and able to leap tall buildings and twist metal with his bare hands, but because of...the right words welled up, a shard of memory from some freshman lit course...because of "little, nameless, unremembered acts of kindness and of love" he had recently committed, without spending a buck or bending a fungo bat.

A little smug in his own virtue, anticipating a future of wealth and power and insight and domestic bliss, he scratched absently at the welt on the back of his neck where he'd gotten a humongous mosquito bite the week before. Must be infected, he thought, as he absently squeezed at the swelling. He felt the pressure release, rolled over, and slept.

The next morning he had a terrible time getting the cap unscrewed from his water bottle.

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FILMS

KATHI MAIO

THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE SCHMALTZY

THIS IS your brain. This is your brain on bright sun...fried.

Does summer really have a detrimental effect on normal brain function? It must. Otherwise, it's hard to explain why we all tamely go out and buy those thick, idiotic novels critics and bookstores label "beach books," and actually *read* them. And why, oh why, do we all flock to the flashy, senseless exercises in cinematic craft that critics and movie marketers label (ahead of time) "summer blockbusters"?

These days, the films of summer are like the beach bullies in those old body-building ads: really big, none too bright, and out to do some damage.

I mean...*Twister*? Let's not even talk about it.

Let us briefly consider, instead, the even bigger blockbuster of this past summer, *Independence Day*. Or, as it is somewhat redundantly referred to, *ID4*. (Query: If they call the first film *ID4*, how are they going to number the inevitable sequel[s]?)

Now, I'll admit that I rather liked a big, dumb autumn movie of 1994 called *Stargate*. Judged by its parts, it was a less than original film. But it was such a glorious hodgepodge of bits and pieces that it almost seemed fresh. It was an old serial space adventure by way of a Cecil B. DeMille biblical epic, with a high-camp flourish suitable to such a venture. Namely, the androgynous Ra-god-cum-alien-dictator, played with perfectly elegant boredom by *The Crying Game*'s Jaye Davidson.

In *Stargate*, humanity is saved by two men searching for redemption: a macho military type (played by Kurt Russell), and a problem-

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solving nerd type (played by James Spader).

Two years later, director/writer Roland Emmerich and his writing partner/producer, Dean Devlin, are recycling not only other people's stuff, but even their own. For in *ID4*, humanity is once again saved by a military man and a nerd. Only this time they're played by Will Smith (as Captain Steve Hiller) and Jeff Goldblum (as David...the tall Goliath slayer).

A few folks have had fun tying all of borrowed bits from ID4 to the films they originally saw them in. But, sadly, the majority of people who scurried to their cineplex to see *Independence Day* had no idea that films like *War of the Worlds* (1953) and *Earth vs. the Flying Saucers* (1956) even existed. Heck, many of *ID4*'s fans are even too young to remember the non-SF disaster flicks of Irwin Allen (circa the early 70's) that also heavily influenced Emmerich and Devlin.

So, for the most part, *Independence Day*'s legions of viewers had no idea how intensely derivative the film was. I can accept that. But was everyone also blind to how incredibly asinine *ID4* is? Guess so. With record-breaking box-office here and abroad, no one seemed to care what a loud, nonsensical rag-bag they were watching.

War-of-the-worlds plotlines have never been known for their logic and intelligence, I know. But *Independence Day*, with its extremely realistic model and CGI special effects, made the idiocy of its action seem even more glaring. When those cowpies-in-the-sky finally attack, the conflagrations they unleash look so real that I wanted their effect upon our world to seem realistic, too. Instead, you have some folks (with nary a sunburn on them) still alive in the incinerated ruins. And how's this for luck? One young woman — alone with her son and old-yeller dog — duck into a doorway inside a tunnel filled with a fireball...and emerge unscathed.

That young woman (an exotic dancer and devoted mom.... Did we stumble into *Striptease* by mistake?) is what passes for a female hero in this story. But the most important thing about Jasmine (Vivica Fox) isn't that she's able to start and drive a toasted truck and gather up dazed survivors of an alien holocaust. No, the crucial aspect of this woman's character is that she is the girlfriend of hero Will Smith. That's true of all the women of *ID4*. Be they striptease artiste or presidential press secretary (Margaret

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Colin), a woman's primary role is to prove that Miltonian adage that "They also serve who stand and wait." And the one woman who wanders too far away from her man (Mary McDonnell's First Lady) pays the price.

I'm really not trying to target this film for its sexist depiction of females. After all, the male characters are no better. With no time for character development amidst all the firefights and booming blazes, Devlin and Emmerich produce a regular parade of ethnic and sexual stereotypes and stock characters. Smith plays a right-stuff topgun with a homeboy swagger. (And he does it wonderfully, I might add. He is one of the film's few saving graces.) While Mr. Goldblum plays the same sardonic intellectual he's played a hundred times before — including in 1993's monster hit, *Jurassic Park*. (Granted, there's no one better at that kind of role, but does the word "typecast" mean nothing to you, Jeff?)

Then there's the yiddisha-papa (Judd Hirsh), the hysterical gay (Harvey Fierstein), the drunken hick (Randy Quaid), the bland, baby-boomer prez (Bill Pullman), the crazy scientist (Brent Spiner), etc., etc.

It was bad enough that the humans were so underdeveloped. But what really pissed me off was how boring and impersonal the bad guys were in this movie. Gone is the kitsch delight of Davidson's Ra, so reminiscent of the flamboyant alien despots of old sf flicks. There's no personality to the alien baddies of *Independence Day*. In fact, we get only the briefest glimpses of individual visitors. And those big gray flying saucers evoked little response in me except puzzlement over the invaders' motivations.

Although the American politicians and generals haven't communicated with the aliens in a significant manner, and have no idea where they came from, they nonetheless conclude that this is a plundering, nomadic race that invades other worlds, destroys the environment, and then moves on. (Gee, Martha, how's that for a throw-away environmental message?) But if they turn all the people and animals into crispy critters, and lay waste to the landscape, what good is the Earth going to be to them?

(This is definitely the kind of movie you don't want to think about. But can I help it? it's my job!)

I tell you, these aliens have precious little going for them. They have no personalities. They display no logic. And their advanced technology is easily crippled by a

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hacker's party trick. Anonymous large-scale villainy seems to be their only attribute and sole talent.

Clearly, *ID4*'s baddies are meant to signify nothing but a monolithic "Them" that the movie audience can want dead with a clear conscience. But this video-game impulse toward the big "clean" kill of a faceless enemy scares me in movies, just as it did as I watched the video of bomb hits during the Gulf War. And it troubles me that the concept of an "alien" has strayed so far from the touchy-feely sentiment of Steven Spielberg's visitors in *Close Encounters* and *E.T.* to the kind of paranoid fantasy that invites us to want to "whup E.T.'s ass," and then cheer the fellow's demise.

Independence Day claims to be about the world coming together to face a common enemy in a kind of intergalactic "good fight." But, did you notice there's not a single speaking-role character who isn't an American? Audience members were, no doubt, relieved to learn that in this New World Order it's the Americans who still lead — and kick butt like nobody's business.

ID4 shows all the signs of being a cinematic exercise in U.S. jingoism. Yet, curiously, Roland Emmerich isn't even an American. He's German. (Now, now, no comments upon the Teutonic character, please.) So maybe this isn't Ugly-Americanism at work. Perhaps this is a worldwide phenomenon, this willingness to happily "whup" the ass of anyone perceived as "other." If so, heaven help us all.

Okay, I just don't like Big Dumb Movies. You might assume, therefore, that a sentimental story, told through the experience of an "other," would be more my speed. Well, sometimes it is. But not if the movie is *Phenomenon*.

This is the movie all the women (and other gentlefolk) who didn't want to see *Independence Day* went to. And it is, indeed, a much different film. *ID4*'s appeal is purely visceral. The explosive action is much more important than its ensemble cast. Conversely, *Phenomenon* features little in the way of action, outside of a flash of bright light and a mild earthquake. But this film is an old-fashioned sudser star-vehicle, completely dependent on its lead character to give the film meaning.

So, score one for director Jon Turteltaub (*While You Were Sleeping*) and screenwriter Gerald DiPego. They managed to get John Travolta as their leading man. Travolta might have limited range

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as an actor, but there are few performers who can come close to our favorite former-sweathog's talent for playing the adorable palooka. (Even his villains are intensely likable blokes.)

It's Travolta's considerable charm that makes you think that *Phenomenon* will work as a movie. And it almost does. For the first half, anyway. It begins, simply enough, with an ordinary small-town mechanic, George Malley (Travolta), who cares for his buddies, tends his garden, and pines after a prickly divorcee (Kyra Sedgewick) who builds uncomfortable willow chairs. Except for said divorcee, everyone in town is in love with the guy, so they all turn out for his birthday party at the town tavern.

That night, George wanders out into the night, where he sees a bright light above him that strikes him down in the middle of Main Street. When he arises, his IQ seems to have leapt 100 points or so. Soon, to everyone's amazement, George is reading two or three books a day. (Somebody call *Hard Copy!)* He's mastering foreign tongues during short truck rides. He displays telekinetic powers — he can break mirrors and make fountain pens spin. And, always a sympathetic guy, George's ability to empathize with others heightens to such an extent that he can find a poisoned child through the severity of his own intestinal cramps.

The set-up of the story is quite involving. Travolta's performance assures this. But Mr. DiPego just didn't seem to know what to do with George after he transformed him into this higher being, So he tries to build to crisis in several ways. He toys with a *Fire in the Sky* alien-abductee-as-outcast plotline, but he doesn't have the heart to follow through with it. Then, he plays around with the standard E.T.-ish scenario of having George persecuted by henchman of the military industrial complex and the medical establishment. But the filmmakers seem to lose interest in that angle, as well.

Instead, *Phenomenon* veers rather pathetically into a *Dark Victory* style weepie, complete with tender love and beautiful death. (Turteltaub has shown real talent for the old-fashioned sentiment in his prior work, but he milks it dry in this one.) And if that weren't enough of a downer, the screenplay tries to explain away the film's unexplainable phenomenon as if it were just another episode of *Chicago Hope*.

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For me, *Phenomenon* was even more of a disappointment than *Independence Day*, because it was a film I expected to like for its intelligence and heart, but instead, left me feeling cheated by its cheap display of bathos.

The summer of 1996 wasn't a total loss, though. I sincerely enjoyed one family fantasy feature, the second this year based on a children's novel by Roald Dahl. *Matilda* is a splendid little film, with an expert screenplay by Robin Swicord *(Little Women)* and her hubby, Nicholas Kazan *(Reversal of Fortune)*. With their complimentary talents, they were a great match for Dahl's pleasingly perverse tale of a young girl's escape from her hellish family.

But talk about masterstroke putting this project in the small but extremely capable hands of Mr. Danny DeVito was the perfect marriage of filmmaker and project. DeVito has made a name for himself, as an actor, playing scumbags. And his reputation as a helmer isn't exactly based on wholesome, syrupy fare, either. His directorial gigs *(Throw Momma From the Train, The War of the Roses)* have displayed a distinctly wicked sense of humor. Just the thing for *Matilda*. And while he was at it, he got to play another lout, the father of the title character.

Matilda (Mara Wilson) got a bad break on parents, all right. Dad (DeVito) is an oily used-car swindler, and her mother (Rhea Perlman) is a bingo-obsessed bubblehead. Neither shows the least interest in their bright, beautiful little daughter. So as a tiny toddler Matilda learns that she must rely on herself, find her own resources. And the greatest of these resources is her love of reading. With the help of a kindly librarian, Matilda sustains herself with books of all kinds.

Interestingly, although George Malley, in *Phenomenon*, learns to love reading and knowledge, the view of the townspeople (and, more subtly, the movie) is that there is something pathologically abnormal about reading. It is symptomatic of illness to quest after learning. But Matilda takes the opposite stance. For this neglected youngster, reading is a sustenance that keeps her sane and healthy.

Eventually, Matilda's parents grudgingly send her to school. But wouldn't you know, it's the grade school from hell, run by a terrifying and brutal headmistress named Trunchbull (played with Beelzebubian relish by British actor Pam Ferris). Our young hero remains

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undaunted, however. She makes friends with classmates. And she forms a close bond with her tenderhearted teacher, Miss Honey (Embeth Davidtz).

And...gradually...Matilda realizes that she has a flair for more than book-learning. She has telekinetic powers that help her defy and undermine the adult authorities who taunt her with "I'm Big — you're little. I'm smart — you're dumb." But, noble creature that she is, young Matilda doesn't simply seek revenge. She uses her gifts to seek justice for others and protect the small victims of an abusive adult world.

DeVito wisely keeps that abuse exaggerated and cartoonish. And he somehow manages to give his subversive comedy a warm heart. He accomplishes this through the radiant performance of his very special leading lady. Mara Wilson, formerly seen in *Mrs. Doubtfire* and *Miracle on 34th Street*, gives her unusual character a perfect balance. She is sweet but never cloying, feisty but never bratty. She is an old soul in a young girl's body, and she lights up the screen with her presence. (Especially enchanting is a scene in which Matilda sets the tacky objects of her parents' home a-dancing to strains of "Little Bitty Pretty One.")

In a summer where the only relief from the Big and Dumb appeared to be the soft-headed sentimentality of *Phenomenon*, *Matilda* was the kind of discovery that made it a pleasure to leave the bright sunshine behind for a satisfying fantasy in the cool darkness.

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Robin Aurelian is a rather reticent writer from Eugene, Oregon. Robin has a dark imagination, and in the last few months, has sold us three inventive, horrific stories. "The Santa Trap" appears first because of its seasonal nature.

The Santa Trap

By Robin Aurelian

IT WAS SUBTRACTION EVE, and the children went through the house looking at everything they cherished, wondering which things Santa would sneak in and steal that night.

Janie's birthday was the week before Subtraction. She hated the fact that her birthday was so close to the holiday. She only got to play with her presents for a week before most of them disappeared forever. Sometimes she thought her parents gave her crummy gifts on purpose — why spend money on something she would lose before she even got a chance to break it?

Mike's birthday was in the spring and he always got much neater things.

"This time I'm going to hide the truck behind the toilet," Mike said, cradling his yellow Tonka truck in his arms.

"Don't be stupid. It doesn't matter where you put it. The more you don't want him to find it, the more he can find it. He's got some kind of sniffer to find the stuff you like the best," said Janie.

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"He didn't find Monkey Man last year," Mike said.

"You didn't like Monkey Man last year. You didn't like Monkey Man until he was the only toy left." Janie looked at her doll, Brewster. Worn and battered Brewster, with the hair half off his head, his clothes all torn and stained. Janie had her own way of dealing with Brewster and Santa. She had had Brewster for four years now. She roughed him up right before Subtraction, made him ugly and dirty, looked at him and thought bad thoughts. She spent all of Subtraction Eve thinking about anything other than Brewster; if she thought of Brewster she thought about him as her most hated toy. So far, Brewster had been there each Subtraction morning, and she could get back to taking good care of him.

She wasn't sure her method would work this year. Even though Santa was only supposed to take the good things, the new things and the neat things to give to other kids who didn't have enough money to get their own neat new things, Janie had heard of Santa taking someone's best loved teddy bear even though it was missing both eyes and an ear. She thought Santa took things just for spite sometimes.

She had never heard of a single person who had gotten anything *from* Santa. She had her suspicions. She thought Santa took everything to the stores so when they opened up the day after Subtraction, the biggest shopping day of the year because people had to go buy replacements for stuff Santa had stolen, the stores would have just what people needed.

She had better put Brewster down. If she carried him much longer maybe Santa would sniff out the stink of her concern on him.

She put him on the mantel, right near the spot where they always left milk and cookies. She tried to make it seem as if she wanted Santa to take Brewster. That was part of her reverse psychology too, but it fueled her worry to leave Brewster there in plain sight.

She had better go play with the toys she liked least.

Mike looked at his Tonka truck and let out a howl. "I'm sick of this!" he yelled. "I don't want Santa taking one more thing from me!"

"Shhh!" said Janie. "He knows if you've been naughty."

"I don't care!" Mike said. "He always takes everything anyway, even when I've been good! I'd like to catch him and take away everything he likes, see how *he* feels about it!"

"Oh, Mike!" Janie breathed, awed by the idea.

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* * *

Everyone left their front door unlocked on Subtraction Eve. It was a rule. If Santa tried your front door and found it locked, he reported your family to the IRS. Santa might drive a hyper-toad-drawn sleigh, and steal all your favorite things, but nobody wanted to be reported to the IRS: unlike Santa, the auditors took away things you couldn't live without.

One year there had been a rash of burglaries on Subtraction Eve. All those unlocked doors! All the burglars had been caught. Janie heard they had been fed to Santa's hyper-toads. This gave her pause.

"We wouldn't be burglars," Mike said. "Catching Santa isn't like stealing from other people. Or maybe it's just stealing from other people *after* they've been robbed."

"Fed to toads," Janie said meditatively.

"We'll wear masks," Mike said. "He'll never know who did it."

"He knows whose house it is, persimmon-brain."

They looked at each other. *Is this worth it?* Janie wondered. She stared at the presents on her desk, all the really cool stuff she had gotten for her birthday. A big sketch pad — her mom had told her if she drew on all the pages before Subtraction she would be able to keep it, and she had doodled on each page with her new markers, the box of thirty-six with colors like aquamarine and celestial blue and crimson and scarlet and chartreuse. She liked the paper and pens so much she was sure she couldn't keep them. Mike had given her a stuffed alligator, and she loved that too, though she had tried not to. She'd named it Wally, even though naming things was a bad idea. Daddy had given her a doll this year, a really neat one she'd seen advertised on TV and had asked for specifically: Talk Back Jack. He came with three outfits: mountain climber, dirt bike rider, and cowboy. If you talked to him, he cussed you. All right, they were wimpy cusses, but still.

Usually she didn't get such neat stuff.

Mike sat on her bed and hugged his Tonka truck.

"Do you think he turns on the lights when he comes in?" Janie said.

They put the trip wire about three feet from the front door so the door wouldn't hit the wire when it opened. Janie held the big pillow case, and Mike held the electric cord. They sat across from each other, Mike just

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inside the living room entrance, Janie behind the coat rack in the front hall, and they waited.

Mom and Daddy had gone to bed an hour earlier, after putting Mike and Janie to bed. "Sleep well, sleep deep, sleep late, children," Mom had said as she tucked them in. "Tomorrow afternoon we'll go to a movie, how about that?"

Janie grabbed Mom and gave her a big kiss. Toad food couldn't go to the movies.

Splat-splat-splat-splat, splat-splat. Janie straightened, gripping the pillow case with both hands. Had to be toads in the driveway.

The front door opened slowly inward. Santa was muttering as he came in. "Blasted bug-grubbing flim-flamming distelfinks," he growled, stumbling over the threshold as he grabbed for the front hall lightswitch and turned on the light. "Yowtch!" He tripped quite nicely over the wire. Janie was on him in an instant, pulling the pillow case down over his head, while Mike wrapped the cord around his wrists, binding his arms behind him. "Burning brands!" cried the muffled Santa. His snatcher-sack had fallen as he fell. "Blistering boards!"

Janie was panting. Fortunately this was a very small, skinny Santa, though all dressed in traditional red.

"Frag mag zigzag," muttered Santa as Janie and Mike rolled him over. "Third time tonight! What do you bleeping want?"

"We want you not to take anything this year, Santa." Janie said.

"Is that all you want?" he said. He had a nice voice, Janie thought, confused.

"I want to see what's in your bag," Mike said. "I want to find something you really like and take it away from you."

"I don't," said Janie.

"There's nothing I like," Santa said.

"That's not fair," said Mike.

"Oh well," said Santa.

"What do we have to do to get you to go away without stealing our stuff this year?" Janie asked.

"There's nothing you can do about it."

"What if we just don't let you go?"

"You're going to let me go, aren't you?"

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Well, this plan isn't working at all, Janie thought. "Are you going to feed us to your toads?"

"No. Of course not."

"You're not going to tell the IRS on us, are you?"

"How much taxes do you pay?"

"None," said Janie.

"There you go."

"What about our parents?"

"Did they help you plan this?"

"No."

"There you go," said Santa, and sighed.

"Untie the cord, Mike," Janie said, pulling the pillow slip off Santa's head. He blinked at her. He was awfully skinny, and had a lot of dark curls, all messy with being tripped and tied up, and he had very dark eyes. His eyes looked nice. How could Santa look nice?

"I will not," said Mike. He grabbed Santa's snatcher-sack and reached into it.

"Don't do that," Santa said. He sounded depressed.

"Ouch!" yelled Mike. He jerked his hand out of the sack.

"There you go," said Santa tonelessly. "Got *a* future now, young man."

The back of Mike's hand was smoking. Mike began to cry: no sound, but tears rolled down his cheeks.

"What happened?" asked Janie.

"He got the brand. He's going to be a Santa when he grows up. What do you least want me to take this year?" Santa said.

Janie stared at him. Was he going to be nice, just this once, and let her keep what she most loved? After she had tied him up? Not likely. "My new doll," she said, "Talk Back Jack."

Santa sighed. He tensed his muscles. The cord broke and his hands were free. "I hate this job," he said. He stood up, grabbed his snatcher-sack, and headed upstairs.

Janie went into the kitchen and got some ice. Tears were still welling up from Mike's eyes. On the back of his hand, inflamed and red, was a jagged "S." She rolled ice in a rag and gave it to Mike to press against the brand.

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She poured milk, put some cookies on a plate, took cup and plate to the mantel.

Santa came back downstairs, his sack bulging. "Sorry about this, kids," he said. He wandered into the living room and drank the milk and ate the cookies. "I hate this job." He looked at Mike.

Mike sniffed. He said, "Do you get to play with the toys before you give them to someone else?"

"I guess you could, if you wanted to," Santa said. He cocked his head, eyed Brewster, glanced at Janie. *I hate that doll,* she thought as hard as she could.

Santa picked up Brewster.

Hate him, Janie thought.

Santa put Brewster back down and sighed. "You're not going to try this again next year, are you?"

Janie and Mike shook their heads.

"Good," said Santa. He went out the front door. Janie and Mike watched as he climbed into his sleigh. The hyper-toads did a couple of limbering hops and then took off.

Janie watched until Santa was out of sight. Then she went and got Brewster, hugged him tight. She went up to her room. Not a single birthday present left — even the underwear Grandma had sent was gone. There was a note, though, in six different colors, on a page torn out of her sketch pad. "Write me in the pen," it said, and gave the address of the state prison.

Janie sighed and slipped the note into her desk drawer.

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Vilma Kadleckova is a Czech writer who has published four books in her native language. She has won the country's prestigious Karel Capek Award, yet is relatively unknown in the West.

In September of 1995, Wired Magazine *sent Bruce Sterling to Prague. He spent a week sleeping on the couch in the apartment of Vilma and her husband Martin Lima. Bruce decided to help Vilma get published in English.*

"Vilma's English is tottering at best," Bruce writes, "but since Martin is a former physicist, he's got fairly strong scientist's English. I know less than zero about Czech and can't even find the proper diacritical marks on [my] Mac, but on the other hand — we have the Internet! So we're involved in a three-way author/translator/interpreter enterprise in which we simply ship drafts back and forth until all parties are convinced that it's something akin to the original story. It seems to me to be a really cool use of the Internet medium and a way to strike a blow for science fiction as a genuinely global enterprise."

Longing for Blood

By Vilma Kadleckova

Translated by M Klima and Bruce Sterling

The Diary of Ashterat: May 15, 636

I WITNESSED HILDUR'S FALL. I watched in my Mirror as my sister chose her prey, hunted him down, killed him and drank his blood. She's no longer human. Her pretty mouth has become the bloodstained jaw of a monster. Her eyes glow like two coals. Even I myself have begun to fear her. Hildur, my dearest sister: Why has this happened to you? Why couldn't you stop when there was still time? What agony it is to love you, and yet be unable to help.

Weeks ago Hildur came up with her mad scheme: a plan she thought would finally free us of our fear and our curse. We Taskre women had always pursued our Quest secretly, hiding in our shadows, flitting through the hidden byways of the World Outside. We offered the Potion, and put the Question, only to men we thought were ready: powerful men, ambitious men, men who sought us out. Hildur was weary of our endless years

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of fruitless magic ritual. Rather than confronting men one by one, she began brewing the Potion by the bucketful.

Hildur wrapped herself in powerful spells, descended in fearsome majesty on a lonely mountain village, and forced all the men there to drink. She left three dozen sobbing widows when she fled that useless massacre. It was far too much death, too much blood, in far too short a time. Her humanity crumbled, her soul shattered. Now she thirsts endlessly for blood.

I hid the slaughter from the World Inside by cloaking the village in deep forest, but I can do nothing for my sister. Hildur is beyond help. She thought she could defeat the conditions of our Quest, and she has fallen beyond any hope of redemption. She has become one of the Beasts.

When all this filth stains my soul beyond all cleanliness, when the evil and fatigue finally bring me down, then I will become like my sister Hildur. I too will long for blood.

The cruelty of this knowledge has broken something inside me. My eyes slide from my all-seeing Mirror to the empty wall. I know that another long siege of insomnia awaits me, gray sleepless reveries crawling and seething with the Beasts of the World Outside. Once Hildur shared with me the terrible labor of enduring those dreams, but there is no Hildur any longer. I can hear the evil echoes of my future, ticking off my remaining days.

What is left of our lives, our time, our world, once we yield to the taste for blood?

I still have quill, paper and ink. I shall do what men and women, wizards and witches have done for ages to beguile the passing time: I will write. I, Ashterat the Taskre, am the eldest daughter of Mennach the accursed. I am the sister of Hildur and Shina, the heir of the Mirror and the Quest. This is the 15th day of May in the year 636 of Harkur. Today I am starting a diary.

The Diary of Ashterat: May 16, 636, morning

Cinderella burst into my room this morning in her cleaning apron and gray kitchen smock. She jerked aside the curtains, flung open the casements, her blundering, too-busy fingers snapping the subtle threads of my

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protective spells. I've grown used to Cinderella. I let her dash about my room, chasing nonexistent dust, singing raucously, peering into every corner. Cinderella loved to know the exact order of everything I owned. I allowed her this. The dumb satisfaction she took in this was stronger than my meager need for privacy.

My foster sister's proper name is Shina, but we have called her "Cinderella" for years. When she was a child, a neighbor-boy once stole her shoes and told her they were hidden in an ashcan. Shina came home barefoot, a weeping urchin caked head-to-foot with soot and cinders, so she has been "Cinderella" ever since. I have watched this incident several times in my Mirror, so many times that I have lost all compassion for Shina. Perhaps it's the way that, even as a five-year-old, she was so eager to rat on the little boy. With quivering innocent lips, she demanded limpid and crystalline justice for herself and stern and immediate punishment for him, just as if that were the natural order of the universe. As if the World Inside were her private jail and she held the golden key.

She saw the state of my bureau, and as she cleaned it, silently, she stole a long look at the inky pages of my new diary. My sleepless night of scribbling. I want no one to read my diary — not yet at least — but I ignored her spying. It didn't matter. Cinderella is illiterate.

Cinderella stuffed some papers aimlessly into a drawer, then turned to me. "You're so pale, my sister. Couldn't you sleep last night?" She has a sweet and solid little voice, like a young nanny singing lullabies. I cannot imagine her as a true Taskre princess: screaming into the midnight storm, trembling with ecstasy, casting spells of ravagement like chill blasts of lightning, slapping the face of Night with her head flung back and her neck bent like a snake's — not my dear foster sister Cinderella. She and I, we have no blood in common. Despite our differences, I liked her, more or less. Maybe because of our differences.

"Have you seen Hildur, Cinderella?"

"She won't let me in her room. She says she'll kill me if I won't stop knocking. She won't eat the breakfast I made her." Her eyes filled with hot wounded tears. She was young and childish and mutable, her emotions like weather in spring.

I laughed and told her to bring me Hildur's breakfast as well as my own.

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Diary of Ashterat: the evening

This afternoon another fool tried to break into the World Outside. I had to rush to Forest Mansion to stop him. When I broke him free of it he was flung violently across the floor in the Mansion's hall. He tumbled like a rag doll, and was lucky not to be slashed to ribbons by his own drawn sword.

This fool was a nobleman. The Forest had torn his mantle and his fine lace and left burrs in his hair and beard, but the eyes in his dark face were wild and lively.

I liked his face, so I tried to tell myself that he was only lost. There are many Crossroads in the Forest and even wizards sometimes miss the subtle hints that they are crossing boundaries between the worlds. If a traveler were weary, if his march had been long, he might cross a border without knowing it. If I found people stuck in Uncertainty I could usually ease them out, back safely to the World Inside; then the little gouts of chaos and strangeness in their brains would seem nothing worse than odd dreams. They'd see no Forest Mansion of course, but perhaps they'd see some crumbling woodsman's hut, with a picket fence of human bones and a black cat sunning on the porch. A stony pagan altar, all the bloody litter of old sacrifice overgrown by ivy. Will of the wisps dancing. They'd see harmless conceits and fantasies.

If they actually saw me, then of course I had to ask them the Question. I would let no one leave my presence without posing the Question. But sometimes they refused the Question. And if they left Uncertainty alive, then they would generally forget all about the experience, once they were safe again in their World Inside.

Those who travel through and past Uncertainty are far less lucky. They discover the real Forest: the snap and jerk of branches, fanged mouths grinning in the leaves, roots that writhe and live, flowers that blink and stare. They suffer a lethal weariness, surrounded by a Forest that shakes with hunger for the necromantic power in their human blood. The deadly Forest of the World Outside. The Forest is vastly older and stronger than any human being. Despite this, it is astonishing how often people will still attempt to fight it.

Only men of great vitality, intelligence and will could get as far as the Forest Mansion. Of course this made them valuable to me. I would ask

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them the Question, and men of their sort would always answer it. And in this way, I had killed every one of them.

My nobleman sprang up lithely, sword in hand, alert. He had made it from the Forest to the Mansion and now we were together in a hall, with green brocade chairs and tables of inlaid pearl. He stood breathing hard for a few moments until the flush left his face and then he sheathed his sword and bowed to me.

When he rose our eyes met.

"Is this all illusion?" he said.

"If you don't believe it, touch me," I said.

I was no longer in my bourgeois dress. When I had entered Forest Mansion the velvet ribbons of the city style had vanished, so my hair hung black and wild. My striped city skirt and samite corset had become a loose green robe, trailing veils the dusky color of leaves in early fall. Olivine bracelets. Gold and emerald necklace. Green is my color from time beyond memory. I have a weakness for green.

I was too fey for any woman of the World Inside, and I knew only too well how I must appear to this poor man. He was pale and staring and afraid. Also, charmed.

"Lady, they were wrong to call you terrible and cruel," he said. "You are beautiful."

The flattery of human men means no more to me than some babble of brooks, a rattle of aspen leaves, the rustle of windblown grain in some farmer's field. But I liked his clever face. It occurred to me that I could spare him. I could lead him away from the Mansion, away from the Forest, away from the World Outside. I could choose not to trouble him with the Question and the Potion and the matter of his death. That idea seemed quite wonderful, but I am the heir of the Quest, and my moment of willfulness passed and the Quest seized my mind and steeled me to my duty.

"Lend me your hand," I said.

"Will I die the moment I touch you?" he said, but he put his palm in mine. I led him through a wing of Forest Mansion. He was truly amazed to walk beside me and still remain alive. I could feel his thoughts, clear but trapped inside his head, just like bees in cast glass. He was a very intelligent man, rational and unexpectedly sharp, but this fateful moment

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had paralyzed his wits. Once he had scoffed at fairy-tales and superstitions, doubted the very existence of the Forest and the World Outside. Now he was musing listlessly about Lady Death — Lady Death and her green sleeves. He was not far from truth when he thought that Lady Death and I look like sisters.

I led him into the great chamber with the clock. I had not been so far into the Mansion in a long time, for I dreaded thinking of my cursed father Mennach, sleeping in that clock. The curtains were drawn and the stale dust-heavy air filled our mouths and lungs with bitterness. Every surface was thick with filth. I opened a cabinet of thickly grimed unshining ebony and retrieved a shining goblet and a gleaming carafe with a cut-glass stopper. I put the goblet in his hand.

The ticking of the clock filled the whole chamber with its murderous rhythm.

It was a tall clock in an ebony casing with columns of malachite and a pendulum of purest gold. The works and the casing were aswarm with tiny sculpted figures, with wicked eyes of glimmering ruby. These were the golts, my father's goblins, who had helped him in his conquests and his final battle. I wondered if I would see the figures move today.

The traveler was entranced by the jeweled hands on the sunken mosaic of the clock's face, the face that is also my father's face. The pendulum rocked and clicked many times before he came to comprehend. When the truth dawned on him, he faltered and sweat gathered on his high and noble forehead. He looked at me in silent question.

"My father....has nothing in common with time," I said slowly. "Enemies imprisoned him in this clock through an act of treachery which is better not to recall."

He nodded. He said nothing gauche or stupid, and I found this admirable. I admired his tact, and his narrow lovely face, and his sparkling eyes and that strong lithe body. Before dawn I would call the golts to help me bury that body, in the much-turned earth beside the Forest Mansion. Sorrow and desire warred inside me like burning waves.

He knew well enough what was happening to him. He was obviously literate, and had read the old stories, even if he had never believed them. That was why he offered me no violence; he surely know no mortal weapon could harm a woman like me in a place like this. In a moment he

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would recall the legend of the Question, and then he would make up his mind about it.

It all struck him just as I had thought it would: first the shock, then the dawning curiosity, and finally, a kindled lust for his share of the power of Mennach and his daughters.

"Yes, you could do that," I told him in response to his silent thought. "You might become the great traveler between the worlds, a Lord and Ruler both here and there. One drink from this carafe and you will know if it's possible. You will taste a strength and power unmatched by anything in the World Inside."

He turned his face as if struggling to hide his thoughts, but I could feel ambition torturing him. It was like standing next to a flame.

"If you drink this and somehow live," I said, "you will have enough power to command that clock. In that case, the clock will never strike, and the creatures inside it will gladly do your bidding. But if you can't command them, that clock will strike the midnight and the potion will curdle inside you and kill you. Decide now." I paused for a tortured moment, then blurted it out: "If you don't dare to drink, I will let you go home. I can lead you safely outside the Forest."

The Question had been put, and I turned aside to give him silence for his answer. Two kinds of men came here from the World Inside. Both kinds were smoldering, restless, and haunted with longing. Some few did manage to leave, and I was never sorry to see that kind go, for I knew they were useless to me. The others, the best men of their world, stayed and tried. They knew that the lost opportunity would haunt them forever, so they tested their luck — and they died.

Every death left another little stain of darkness on my soul.

"Fairy of the wood!" said my nobleman. "Let me try a bit of this wine of yours."

"It's a very bitter wine."

"Let me drink, woman. Mere taste is beside the point."

I had hoped for something else, but expected nothing less. I filled his goblet to the rim. His hand never trembled. I admired the lovely polish of his well-tended nails.

"Tell me your name...please," I murmured. I never asked their names.

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He laughed and tugged a little golden medallion from beneath his shirt. "Lady, you may know my name here — when I die!" The fool had no intention of dying.

He emptied the goblet at a draught.

The clock ticked on. The eyes of the golts grew red and shiny. Indifferent to my sorrow, they emerged from the clock and slowly and darkly struck the midnight.

The Diary of Ashterat — May 17, 636

morning

Cinderella came to my room as I was smearing on my lipstick, and she made a face. A merry laugh, a little superior smile. The natural consequence of her chastity and virtue, prevailing over my louche and decadent vanity and caprice. Yes, she was still a virgin, and I was no virgin at all. She never used cosmetics and I never failed to paint my face. She slept the sleep of the just and righteous from every sunset to every sunrise, and then she found me in the morning powdering the bags beneath my eyes.

Sometimes I envied my cindery sister Shina — especially after a night like my last one, full of tears.

"You need to try this," I told her. "Use a decent mascara for once, pluck your brows, pay some real attention to your hair. The way you look, it's no wonder you're still called Cinderella."

"I like the way I look," Shina said quickly. And I saw myself in her mind's eye: a blank-eyed, weary creature grasping at youth. But she was so wrong. I was ageless. Far beyond young or old. My face was smooth and unlined, the skin of my throat and breast sleek and dewy, hands small and elegant and utterly unspoiled by honest work. Not a single gray hair. All the doing of my father's potion, gulped down so long ago.

Not my eyes, though. My eyes had seen too much, changed too many times. Old.

I gazed again into my Mirror as Cinderella cleaned my room. She hurried to my writing desk. My diary has become a nagging torment to her dumb curiosity. Oh, that curse of Mennach! That same obnoxious and all-too-human curiosity. It has dogged me always. The world of human

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beings, the Inside World, was made too small for them. Small like a breadbasket. The hands of the old weaver had whipped their world into being from the lithe strands of wicker, but with the passage of time the little world-basket grew dry and rigid and lost all flexibility: those were the fates of human beings, their customs, their constantly repeating errors. And the wicker basket itself knew nothing of other baskets, or of other and darker bread.

There was nothing I could do to change the World Inside. It had been young once and I had been young once, and even then I had not been able to change it. Now its rules were firmly set, bringing me nothing but duties and subjugation.

I was silent and let Cinderella do as she pleased. Curiosity.... I should write here about the golden medallion of the too-curious nobleman. But I do not want to remember the medallion. Nor do I want to remember that face, because then I will be sorry that I did not kiss it.

His gold medallion was embossed with three sprigs of lavender. Nothing more. Lavender is a lovely herb, but the symbol means nothing to me.

evening

MY SISTER Hildur had retreated to the gloominess of Moor. She traveled through the treacherous sumps to a stone hut she had built just over the border of the World Outside, her cheerless and windowless little fort. There she crouched and waited while her skin grew translucent, while her fangs grew sharper and her eyes began to glow. Wings wrenched themselves from the skin of her back and grew thick and supple. She flew at night to haunt the World Inside and gather blood and strength.

I might have endured all this, except for one thing. My sister Hildur failed to recognize that anything about herself had changed.

I managed to cross the Moor by a more-or-less visible path and warily approached her stone cottage. I peered through the open leather flap of the door. Hildur squatted sullenly in darkness, leaning against a damp granite wall stained with nitre. Our eyes met and within her mind I saw a bottomless emptiness.

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At the sudden unexpected sight of me, a chasm of hunger split her open like an earthquake. I knew instantly that I should never have come to see Hildur in her lair in the Outside World. It was very dangerous; it was a terrible mistake.

Her fanged mouth snapped open with a screech of hatred and she sprang on me. We wrestled on the muddy floor, Hildur going for my throat. The transformation had made her much stronger than I had realized; she was crushing me with terrific blows of her bony knees and winged elbows. I could not tear loose. Finally I wrenched my left hand free and jammed it into Hildur's mouth. Her jaws clamped shut and I heard more than felt the cracking of my own crushed bones.

Hildur fell limply to the earth, flopping, glutted. It was very rich blood. She was gagging with ecstasy. Vampires were almost defenseless when they fed. Pain rose up my arm like a fiery wall as I struggled to shriek the syllables of a spell of binding. The pain overwhelmed me for a moment, but when I came to, Hildur was lying there motionless. I pried her jaws apart and freed my trapped and bleeding hand.

I worked on my bleeding hand for an hour, long enough to knit the flesh and bones, if not my other, sadder wounds. Then I let it be and turned to Hildur.

She would sleep for centuries.

I made her a heavy coffin from dark granite — magic, magic for everything. The lid I sealed with the strongest spell I knew. Symbols that a witch could use only two or three times in a lifetime glowed upon Hildur's tomb. They were the only gleam of light in that dark house.

Ashterat's Diary: May 18, 636

Today I healed my wounded hand more thoroughly. Deep scars still show. I had an argument with Cinderella about a fox.

Shina often brings animals to Bourgeois House. Lost alley cats, mongrel dogs, mice, and injured birds. She used to feed the local pigeons, especially the turtledoves, which then gathered in vile swarms on the eaves of our house, befouling everything and making obscene cooing noises. Nothing gave her greater pleasure than to comb out the starved hide of some mangy cat, filling her smock with shed fur and hopping fleas.

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Hildur and I never found it easy to explain to her how deeply and sincerely we detested these habits of hers. Sister Shina loved her little animals with a deep compassion. Our kindly Cinderella.

Earlier today, out to gather mushrooms, she found a weak and sickly fox wandering stunned through the meadow. She brought it home in her basket. Luckily my protective spells recognized the danger and refused all entrance to the animal. I found Shina weeping bitterly, trying to shove her crumbling basket through a window.

"Please, please let us in," she cried. "Little Fox is hungry!"

I opened the basket and saw the animal's muzzle white with slobber, its eyes gone murky with hydrophobia. The eyes stared up at me with vague animal hope. Hope for Lady Death.

I ordered the eyes to go blank.

"Don't hurt foxy!" Shina screeched.

The little beast of the Inside World did not struggle with the death I sent it; it lay down gently and almost seemed to smile. I wish I could write the same for the beasts of the World Outside....

Shina shuddered with outraged horror as the furry body slumped to the bottom of her basket. Perhaps she'd never realized how easily I can kill.

She started to sob and moan.

I flung the infected basket into the middle of our back yard and unleashed a sheet of flame at it. The flame cremated the poor creature in a black gout of smoke and a burst of burning meat; in a matter of seconds the foulness was only harmless cinders.

"Why did you do that, Ashterat?" Shina howled, smearing her tears with her sleeve. "You don't love me! You don't love anything or anybody!"

It occurred to me then that I ought to marry Cinderella off to someone.

Ashterat's Diary: May 22, 636

Two long nights, almost without sleep.

I dreamed of the Beasts, as I had expected. Long ago I trained myself to sleep lightly, to spring to wakefulness at any sign of danger. It seemed

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a clever idea at the time, but then the Beasts came to my dreams and my nights became a long series of duels. Whenever I dream, many people of the World Inside suffer along with me. Whenever I wake, I can sense those other people wracked by their own nightmare Beasts, gone breathless and trembling with terror — at these echoes from the dreambattles of their Taskre guardian. Everything that struggles to get Inside — the mossy quivering limbs of the Forest, the slimy bubblings of Moor, all the Outside Beasts and creatures, from places both named and nameless — they cannot enter the World Inside without first slithering through the dreams of the children of Mennach. Since Hildur now slept beneath her stones in the Moor in the World Outside, that meant that my dreams alone bore the whole burden for the World Inside.

My despair and the loneliness drove me to visit my mother.

Shilzad had not left her sickroom in ages. She had deteriorated ever since her sad mésalliance with Shina's father, her second husband. Perhaps she had pitied him, a widower with a small girl — she had lived with him, even married him, and yet never put him the Question. Shilzad had, of course, outlived her weakly human husband for years. Nothing was left of her once-great powers now but the blackened, shriveled webs on her sickroom's ceiling. She lay hollow-eyed and staring on the white wooden bed her second husband had built for her in Farm House, and that we her daughters had carried here to Bourgeois House, and she lay there for years and she waited for death.

I understood my mother's weariness, that spiteful impatience that had forced her into the absurd and ill-judged remarriage and then into this queer parody of old age. If we Taskres did not end in blood, then we ended in driveling foolishness. I could not believe that my mother would manage to die at all easily.

Shina always opened her stepmother's windows first and bustled about the sickroom every morning. Despite her tender care, the room still hung thick with dank rags of magical blackness. Shilzad's gaunt face and thin lips dominated the gloom. She had not eaten for years, starving herself in a vain attempt to win the graces of Lady Death. Her wrists were deeply slashed, but no blood ever came forth. Her shrunken gut was awash with potent poisons that had signally failed to kill her. These dramatic gestures were simply not enough.

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My mother had missed a golden chance to die long ago, and now she was cursed by immortality.

"So, you want to talk about Hildur now?" she whispered hoarsely. "I know all about you and Hildur, Ashterat. She came to me and she offered me a cup of blood. You and I both know what happens once a Taskre girl has sunk to that."

Her voice was as frail as an echo, and still it froze my bones. The counsel of her madness was like some ugly parody of her past maternal wisdom. Why had I come here? To seek consolation? From her? For me? I must be losing my mind.

"Hildur's past helping anyone anymore," I told my mother. "The World Outside will learn this, and then it will concentrate all its efforts against me. It will try to break through me to ravage the World Inside. I'm the last bearer of Mennach's Curse. My dreams will be more terrible than any I've ever seen. I'm the last guardian of the gates now. I'm left alone."

The weight of my responsibility overwhelmed me at that moment.

I was left alone. Maybe I went to see my mother just so I could tell her that, just so I could write this sentence in my diary: I'm all alone.

Diary of Ashterat: May 21, 636

The royal entourage entered our town at dusk: a herald with the king's flag, royal men-at-arms in uniform, king's huntsmen, noble courtiers and their servants...and a prince of Harkur. They were returning home after a long hunting excursion. Only bad luck could have brought them to our city, a place too modest to support a royal visit.

As they passed through town I crossed my fingers and I spat out a Word, and the prince's fine white charger slipped and broke its leg.

The prince took a servant's horse, but as they tried to leave town, clouds clotted overhead and the heavens broke loose and all the water on Earth poured down. Lightnings chased each other and thunder roared unceasingly. My masterpiece of weather magic. They were drenched at once. They sought the town's best inn, and found the place as it always was, hopelessly damp, dirty and riddled with bedbugs. They sent servants out in the darkness and rain to search the city's more prominent houses for help and hospitality, but the rooms they were offered were cramped and poor, with or without the bedbugs, while the best breed of horse our

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town can manage is a brewery cart-horse. The city's wealthiest bourgeois simply refused to answer the servants' hammering at their gates. In the midst of this thunderstorm, the townsfolk were sleeping very soundly. Likely they were sleeping all the better because I myself was still awake.

Eventually their aimless wandering in the dark and downpour brought them to Bourgeois House, as I had known it would. I had the guest rooms already made up, and my stable even boasted a spare horse. A true beauty of a horse, with shining groomed hide and glossy mane and a noble head. He was black as coal, black as unclean magic, but he had been my pride once.

It was almost midnight when the royal party arrived, bringing their prince. The prince I needed for Shina.

I welcomed them in the hall beneath the staircase. From the outside, my Bourgeois House looked deceptively modest. For this night, and for the day to follow, its dimensions stretched far into the World Outside. Bourgeois House was immense, cavernous. I always wonder whether guests will notice this discrepancy. So far, they never have. They cross the borders between worlds without a single glimmer of conscious recognition.

I stood by the window in my goldworked green samite gown, the best dress a bourgeoise like myself could be expected to afford. My hair was laboriously styled and my scarred left hand was safely hidden in my long lace cuffs. Shina, who was the basic reason for this whole masquerade, was not in the room. Stunned with awe and reverence, she was hiding behind a door watching the proceedings through a keyhole — torn between gross curiosity and the terror that a courtier might suddenly discover her lurking there in her mouse-gray linen dress.

The prince was the last to enter. He strode through a line of respectful courtiers and threw back the rain-soaked hood of his mantle. My knees went weak. In the darkness and rain and in all my spell-castings and Mirror-scryings, I had not taken time to properly study his face. He was no older than Shina. His eyes were like two black opals. Like the night sky at the farthest rim of the World Outside. More beautiful, more harmonious, more charming, if anything, than the face of his older brother, the Crown Prince. The Prince who was named Lavendul.

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The hunting party had no idea what had happened to Lavendul. They had lost him on their hunting expedition, and they cheerily assumed he had returned to the capital alone. They were hoping to meet him at the royal palace in Arkhold. Meanwhile Lavendul, poisoned dead at my hand, was rotting under the loam at Forest Mansion. The younger prince was named Rassigart. I hated my Mirror for never properly showing me his face.

"My friends call me Astra," I said. "Welcome to my house." I took a jug and poured him wine, with my own hands.

Diary of Ashterat: June 11, 636

When they left, they took my black horse. They did not take Shina. The arrogant fools took no notice of poor Shina at all.

In the nights that followed, the Beasts attacked me with unparalleled ferocity. I was worried for Shina's safety, and I fled to Forest House to fight them in my dreams. I avoided my Mirror — my face looked like stone, like a sandblasted, storm-blasted rock. My cheeks were ashen, my eyes dull as some dying animal's. I went to sleep with a dagger beside me and every morning I pulled myself from bed, far past the edge of exhaustion, harried almost to madness by the bloodthirsty hounding of the Beasts Outside. It was very difficult without Hildur. I would stagger from Forest House to Bourgeois House in a mud-stained dress with my hair full of twigs and pine needles. My wounds were worsening and I had no power left to heal myself.

There was only one possible ally left to me — my father, The Sleeper in the Clock. I did not want to pay the price it would take to beg my father's help. Instead, I propped myself up, drinking special potions. My mouth and tongue turned a leaden blue from sipping vile concoctions of jirmen rind and cockatrice eggs. Sooner or later I would sell my soul for an hour of decent sleep.

"You really need to rest, dear sister," Cinderella advised me sweetly, and I snapped and told her the truth: "I may not sleep! I'm not allowed that."

Shina's life was an utter mess now, with her undying stepmother and wretched foster sister, but I had no time or care to spare for her. Worse yet,

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she had fallen utterly in love with Prince Rassigart. She grew bright-eyed and dreamy and soulful, and neglected the housework to stare idly out the balcony windows, into the street, into my Mirror, her head in the clouds. I surprised her once trying to blacken her eyebrows with a little chip of charcoal from the hearth. I felt so sorry for her that I couldn't bear to make fun of her.

If I'd had more power, I'd have conjured her up a ball gown and dressed her to kill. As it was, I gave her money and told her to buy a roll of fine velvet and find herself a decent tailor in the town. She couldn't do this. Something about this was too much of a challenge for her, too fraught with some strange humiliation.

I wanted Shina out of the house. Let her marry somebody. If not some prince, then anyone — any half-decent fool, as long as he lived far away. Fine romantic longings were all well and good, but if I fell apart here, she would certainly be ripped to pieces.

Finally I realized it was no use trying to protect Shina from the truth anymore; girlish virgin or no, she had to be made to understand. I grabbed her wrist, tugged her into my room and flung her into an armchair.

"Listen, Shina," I said, voice trembling with anxiety, "you know about the town. And Forest House. And Bourgeois House and Farm House. But you've never really seen the World Outside."

"Is it far away?"

"No. It's very close. It's getting closer. You could walk out into the World Outside the way you walk out into the street. It could happen by accident. It could happen to you any time. You mustn't think of it as being far away any more. Think of it in a different way now. Imagine it.... imagine you are sitting wide awake in a brightly lit room in Bourgeois House and outside it is night and an absolute flood of wolves and bats is pressing up against our windows. Nothing can happen to us while we keep the doors and windows closed. But if anyone opens a gate...."

Cinderella nodded, wide-eyed and pale. She was more afraid of me than she was of the truth, but that didn't seem to matter much. Just as long as she was properly afraid.

"There's something we have inside us that pulls in all the Beasts of the Outside World, something they must have, something they lust for. That's why they squeeze up against our windows and they slink and they

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wait and they smell out even the tiniest crack or crevice that will get them into the house of light. They want something they don't have, something they can only get here. You know what I mean, don't you, Cinderella? I mean the blood."

She shrieked and put her hand to her bare throat. I held her other hand, squeezing it hard enough to hurt. "Calm down. I'm not a vampire. If I were, you'd have died long ago."

She accepted that, nodding. She sat in the armchair and listened obediently.

"We are Taskres," I said. "There are Beasts in the World Outside and human beings in the World Inside, and then there are people like us. People who can travel the worlds. Gatekeepers. Mennoch my father was our King, but he fell long ago to the treachery of the monsters Outside, and he left two daughters and no son. After that every Taskre wanted to be the strong king. They tore themselves apart in stupid rivalries and meaningless clan quarrels, and now we are all that is left. We're not entirely immortal, you know. There are ways to destroy us."

"So who keeps the gates now?" Shina murmured.

"Whoever is left," I said. I had lied to her about Hildur. I simply told her that Hildur had eloped with a lover. Sometimes I showed her forged letters supposedly sent from Hildur, which of course Shina couldn't read. Dazed with infatuation with the Prince, Cinderella had swallowed this story whole. It was a nicer story than learning that your older sister had been transformed into a leathery monster longing endlessly for blood. That was not the kind of story that Cinderella could hold inside her little world of goodness, order, and sunshine. A world where morning always came to sweep the shadows back.

"I hope you're listening to me, Shina," I told her. Then I handed her a vial of yellow glass. "Pay attention, because this is important. If you find me some morning with my throat torn open, this is what you'll have to do. Break this vial and sprinkle this powder over my face. You get Mother onto her feet — do whatever you have to do — and gather up whatever you can carry, any precious things. Take weapons with you. Close the shutters of Bourgeois House, lock the doors tight, all of them. Then run away, the farther the better. Anywhere. A big city would be good. The capital maybe. Anyplace far from the forests and the moors."

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There was a long silence. "Did you understand me?" I said gently.

Cinderella looked up suddenly, as if snapping out of a trance. With unexpected vigor, she said, "Maybe it's just not like that, Ashterat."

She yanked her hand from my grip and slapped the arms of her chair. "Ashterat, this is a chair. It's furniture! It's always been here in our house. This is a town, it's just a normal little town with real people in it. These terrible beasts you're talking about, how are they supposed to get in here with us? Are they coming down our chimney? Are they jumping on us out of the closets?" She giggled, then grew very tender and serious. "Sister, you need more rest. You look so tired these days. It can't be healthy."

She knew absolutely nothing, but she was right about the sleep. If I don't sleep properly, I'll go mad.

Diary of Ashterat: June 13, 636

I MANAGED to survive for thirteen days.

Lately, the attacks have been weakening. I'm simply outlasting the Beasts through sheer determination. Last night I managed to sleep soundly for almost a full third of the night, for the first time since Hildur's fall. It helped me so immensely that I can hardly describe it. It beat back the killing apathy that had turned my life into dumb endurance. Today is almost like a convalescence. Now I can write a bit in my diary. I have been reading poetry, the old Harkur songs I love. I put a few things in order in the Forest Mansion. I even put on my veil and went shopping in the market with Shina, but their idea of velvet is decidedly inferior.

Word in the market is that Lavendul is still missing. He never returned from the hunt and they all believe he must be dead. They aren't wrong. Rassigart will be the new crown prince. They say he is looking for a bride.

Diary of Ashterat: June 27, 636

A letter with the king's seal!

The absurdity of it made me laugh aloud: a royal invitation to a ball at the capital, of all things. Rumor was right; the prince is formally hunting for a bride. The news had Shina in ecstasy. Now I have to invent

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some way to get her into the palace. The invitation wasn't for her. It's for me.

I was a bit uneasy to see Prince Rassigart's apparent lasting interest in "the Bourgeoise Astra," a woman not his social equal in a town that is far from wealthy. But it was all caused by the horse, naturally. I used my Mirror to check the last few days at the Palace stables. There was Rassigart, displaying his coal-black steed to some swarthy foreigner in a spangled cloak. The court wizard went over the horse, gesturing counterspells. It would take a far better wizard than some court functionary to break my magic, but the very attempt was proof of Rassigart's suspicions.

Did he want to lure me to the capital? Was the Palace a trap for me?

The curse of Mennach — I was very curious. It would be a fine deed to match Cinderella with her Prince, but I was suddenly painfully curious about the Palace. Why hadn't I gone to the Palace before? Obviously the luxury and wealth of court life in Arkhold would be a natural lure for strong, ambitious, power-hungry men. Maybe the man I'd been waiting for endlessly was already some courtier in Arkhold, wasting his life and talents when he could be the very man to take my Question, drink my potion and survive to transform himself.

I fell back in my armchair, struck with thought. I could go to Arkhold, enter the Palace, talk with all the beaus of the ball. Chat with the prince himself, or even confront his swarthy wizard. Perhaps I would fill some glasses before the night was out. I did not fear their paltry human tricks and magics. The worst they could do to me was as nothing compared to the Beasts Outside.

The only complication was Shina herself. I could not put her in danger; she could only be safe at the court ball if no one knew of our connection. I could make her swear to avoid me and show no recognition, but she was far too naive to maintain any good pretense.

Then I laughed. It was very simple. Cinderella would certainly avoid me if she thought she was going to the ball against my will.

Ashterat's Diary: July 15, 636

I shouted: "King of the Taskres! I, Ashterat your daughter, would speak with you."

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The ruby eyes of the golts gleamed in the candlelight. The pendulum faltered and was still. My voice trailed into silence. Mennoch had been trapped when I was only a child. He has never spoken since. When they deformed his body they also stole his voice. Because he could not speak, I always spoke to him in ceremony. With official court formality. Also, I am very afraid of him. My father, the silent idol in his ebony altar.

I placed a terra cotta cup in front of the silent clock and removed the scarf that covered it. "Here is your price, dread king! I crave the boon of two nights' peaceful sleep before my journey to Arkhold." I stepped back, and I let him silently feast.

He might have helped me of his own free will, my father, but he had no such free will. They broke his will long ago, and since they were too weak to kill him, they trapped him inside the clock. He has become a wish-granting machine. His price: royal blood. The greater the demand, the greater his price. Only royal blood will do: that is part of Mennach's curse.

Once we used Shilzad's blood, then Hildur's or my own. The choices were narrowing. Perhaps the "royal blood" of the house of Harkur would do. I cursed the evil chance that had brought Prince Lavendul here, and had him die in this very room before the clock, unknown, unrecognized.

Diary of Ashterat: July 18, 636

Preparations for the journey. Shina pleading with me, sobbing, losing her temper. I finally silenced her with a mild little spell and locked her in her room to keep her out of the way.

I created a ball gown for her from an exquisite violet-blue velvet, striped in gold. Veil, jewelry, gems, and crystal slippers. A vial of blue perfume, rouge for her cheeks, lustrous black for brows and lashes. I soaked her scarf in aphrodisiac, leaving nothing to chance. Then I hid all these gifts.

I myself wore green.

For Shina, a splendid carriage with four white chargers. My carriage was green with black chargers. Shina wouldn't need a forged invitation. It was simpler for me to enchant the guards at the gate.

Finally, I needed agents to release Shina from her locked room and give her all these gifts when the time was ripe. Nothing simpler — I called

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some golts from the Outside, fellows of my father's golts in the clock. I bound their mischievous minds, their piercing teeth and their lust for blood with a strong secure spell. To spare Cinderella the shock, I cast upon them a guise that made these nasty goblins resemble her beloved little animals. Every true Taskre knew how to use golts properly, when needed.

Then I went to bed and in exchange for my cup of blood I slept for thirteen hours straight.

I woke up beautiful.

Diary of Ashterat: July 19, 636

A thousand wax white candles burned in crystal chandeliers and gilded wall sconces. Flames glittered in the courtiers' eyes and jewels. The ballroom was a museum of exquisite court couture, and mannered gestures, and weak, epicene faces. I waited breathlessly for Shina. I was sure of one thing: she outshone any of the female aristocrats.

A captain of the royal guard approached me. His arrogant swagger and ambitious squint made him a sure candidate for the Question tonight.

He spoke from behind a cupped hand. "His Highness Prince Rassigart seeks a private audience with you, Madame Astra." I trembled at the thought of a possibly shattering confrontation with the Prince. I was here in all my power, with the dread power of Mennach's curse.

The Captain led me to an iron door in an obscure corner, and to the small room beyond. He ushered me through the door and he closed it at once, from the outside. It was deeply gloomy in the room, but my eyes adjusted swiftly.

There sat the Prince. He was not dressed for a ball.

He wore a plain white shirt, his collar conspicuously open. The window to a garden hung open behind him, chill and glimmering. His hair was starry with night-dew and the air hung heavy with the damp reek of clay from the garden. I felt tension burning along his nerves, his will locked like steel to keep the fear at bay.

"You wanted me to come," I said bluntly. No court niceties here. To treat him as my equal was an honor, not an insult, and he knew it.

"That horse you gave to me is not of flesh and blood," he said, with equal bluntness.

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"Is it a worse horse, for that?"

"No. It's the best horse I've ever had. Finer than royal stallions of the most exalted bloodlines."

"Why be unsatisfied, then?"

He rose and came toward me. Either he had very good eyesight, or he knew every inch of this dark little room by heart. "I'm very satisfied," he told me slowly. "Everyone agrees that I must be satisfied. My brother is dead and nothing can keep me from the throne." Anger rose in his voice. "I'm very satisfied! Except that I never wanted any of this!"

His anger was real enough, but he had no discretion. He was as young as my Shina, and nearly as naive. I laughed silently and placed my hands on the bare slopes of his neck and shoulders.

"But Rassigart! What has your brother's death to do with my horse?" I said, and my voice sounded sweet even to my own ears. He was shocked to have me touch him and stepped back quickly, letting my hands fall.

"I asked my good friend Gallengur to investigate certain doings in your town," he told me sharply. "A vile creature that attacks lonely houses at night, and ambushes travelers after dusk. Victims found with their throats slashed and not a drop of blood left in them."

I shrugged. "I've heard such rumors, too."

"They are not rumors, madame. My man Gallengur has seen some of the corpses himself."

Gallengur must surely be that southern wizard, I thought. I made a mental note to add brave Gallengur to my list of candidates for the Question. I should have tracked Gallengur more closely in my Mirror. Perhaps he'd seen Hildur and tracked her himself — though not back to Bourgeois House.

The princes — full of brave curiosity and reckless of consequences — had followed those rumors in person. Perhaps Rassigart would have come to my town even without my lures. Why had he not brought his pet wizard with him? My thoughts raced ahead — of course, the court wizard would have been searching for Lavendul. Searching many days and nights, with all his craft — until he had proved that the prince, dead or alive, was no longer in the World Inside.

I glanced at the Prince's bared throat and smiled gently. So that was it! He had linked Hildur's attacks, his brother's disappearance, and my

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horse, and he had reached his own conclusions. The young Prince was courageous — or thought he was. He was merely reckless. To needlessly place himself in such personal danger was not the work of a statesman. This was no mere vampire he was trifling with. He needed a lesson in fear.

I gestured in the darkness, and a binding spell caught him. He lost his voice, his hands.

"If Gallengur is right — and he is," I told him slowly, "then this creature you describe could be very near."

He grew tense, his worst suspicions confirmed. He tried to break free — cry aloud, draw a dagger, ring the bell he had cleverly placed on the table. He only swayed in place, an icy chill gripping his flesh. His muscles knotted; he tried his best, but he moved not at all. I saw him grow pale as he realized the full extent of his helplessness.

"This is what you wanted, isn't it?" I said, with poisonous sweetness. "To lure a vampire into your trap? That was a naive plan, my Prince. Despite all your fine precautions, wasn't it stupid and reckless to leave yourself alone with her — in the dark?"

He struggled hard with the spell, concentrating now on reaching for his dagger. His hands would not obey his will. His mouth was sealed.

"You've positioned your guards, and ordered them to rush in with your first call." I laughed at him. "But now your tongue is stiff. I know about that dagger up your sleeve. Why don't you pull it out and brandish it? What's the matter with you, Rassigart? Your soldiers are only a few feet away! If you have any clever new stratagems, you'd better try them quickly. You haven't much time left."

Maddened by his impotence, Rassigart shuddered with the effort to move. In spite of that, he had not yet panicked, and I admired him for his strength of will. In the end, though, I knew I would be able to break him. He was still master of his fear but he had never known slow and deliberate cruelty.

"You're bound like a fly in the web," I whispered, moving to his side. "Whatever may happen now, you can't stop it."

In the silence I could hear the frenzied pounding of his heart against his ribs. I put my hands inside his shirt, through his open collar, and felt his self-control shatter at the caress. Sweat ran down his chest.

I drew both my thumbnails down his neck, from earlobe to collar-

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bone. Then I did it again. The slow touch terrified him more deeply and intimately than any threatening word. It was the worst moment of his young life. I felt him cursing me within his mind as he prepared to die. He was suffocating. Almost blacking out.

I grabbed his arms and shook him violently. "Prince Rassigart! Wake up!"

He gasped for air, the deadly terror ebbing.

"If I were what you thought I was, you'd be dead now," I said, in a new voice. "But you're still alive, as you can see. There is no danger."

Feebly he tried to brush me aside; the binding spell was leaving his flesh. I snapped my fingers and the unlit candles in the room leapt into flame. Light showed his face, gone haggard in a few moments. By the curse of Mennach, but he was young. Only seventeen. Younger than I by centuries.

I helped him to his chair.

He would not dare to question me any longer. And I had already learned much from his indiscretion.

He was limp and silent. Too long. "Touch my teeth, if you don't believe what I tell you," I offered sweetly. "They're only common teeth."

He looked up, eyes blank and wet, and I saw then that I had crushed him. He was like withered leaves inside. For the moment, his spirit was well and truly broken. There was no one he could tell about this experience, no one he could confess to. The humiliation was too deep and too personal; to tell other men about it would only invite mockery. It was just between the two of us now, a dark liaison. A secret act of bondage and cruelty. It was a permanent bond.

"It's time for the ball," I said. "Call your valet and dress yourself properly."

He stood up without a word, shaking violently. I was sorry for the lesson I had given him, and I leaned toward him, careful not to touch him. "After this," I said, "other creatures of darkness will have a harder time with you. You should know that, at least."

He said nothing, but staggered out the door. He waved aside the waiting captain and three armed guards.

"You're too young, Rassigart," I hissed at his back, so the others could not hear. "When you're older we will meet again."

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Shina glowed like a sapphire in a golden ring. Adoring gazes followed her every move as she made her way through the ballroom toward the throne. I stepped aside into shadow, and watched as she made her best courtesy toward the King. It was quite easy to influence the King. When I was through with him, he sincerely believed Shina to be a baroness from the West, a distant relation from some cadet wing of the family that had never really existed.

Then the Prince arrived. He was deathly pale, but I doubt that anyone noticed. Still more a boy than a man, he was nevertheless impressive, and the courtiers, as one, bowed low in respect. I did the same.

The dancing began. Subtly, I guided the steps of Shina and the Prince until they were face to face. When their eyes finally met they were both astounded by the grace of Providence that had somehow, against all odds, united them here. Rassigart was charmed by this candid young ingenue, and Shina had already adored the Prince for weeks. When the music resumed she slipped at once into his arms, a vision in blue against the gold and black of his royal mantle. Nothing and no one would separate them now — at least, not for the rest of the night. I let the lovers be, and went about my own grim business.

Five men died quietly that night. Every useless death stripped away more of my false hopes and left me shriveling with despair. The brave Captain of the Guards was first to fall, followed shortly by Gallengur, the canny wizard of the South. The moment my Question was made clear to them, the courtiers grasped for the cup of power with deadly eagerness. Five men in a single night! Even my own endless life could not make up for so many shortened ones. But how was I to know what man might pass the test? Somehow, some man must be strong enough to survive the transformation and protect the World Inside from the threat of the Beasts. I would gladly die myself, to find that answer.

As I skulked sorrowfully back into the ballroom, I almost collided with Cinderella. Her veils flapping, she was dashing up the wide staircase to meet her Prince on the terrace. In her eagerness she looked neither right nor left, until she was suddenly brought up short, face to face with me. She went ashen, for she was here without my permission.

Rather than do anything reasonable, she panicked at once, turned on

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her heel and stumbled off down the staircase. Her skirts impeded her, and she lost a shoe. She didn't bother to pick it up, but instead snatched off her other crystal slipper and used its sharp heel to chop her way through the crowd. This gaucherie won many a pained, unfriendly look for the King's young relation from the West. The false identity scheme wasn't working, so I took a moment to wipe the memory from the King's royal mind. If Shina had to flee, it was better that she not leave too many traces.

Cinderella dashed through the guards — still stunned with enchantment, they conspicuously failed to notice her — and jumped headlong into her carriage. The golt coachman whipped up the golt horses, and off they went.

Somewhere, a clock happened to strike midnight. There stood the glamour-struck Prince, perplexed, clutching the abandoned shoe, staring after his chimerical beauty who had fled without a single civil goodbye. He was as memorable as a painting.

Diary of Ashterat: July 20, 636

Shina was meek and hushed next morning, dreading a good scolding. A mild chiding did seem in order. "You've charmed the Prince," I told her. "You quite spoiled the rest of the event for him when you ran away. He wouldn't look at another woman all that night. If it weren't for his royal duties as host, he would saddle up his best horse and come straight after you." This chased the worry from her face and put her into hours of erotic daydream. I sent her to her room. It was time to move the house.

Moving the entirety of Bourgeois House was no elementary spell and the preparations for it consumed the whole day. I chose another, suitably obscure city, hundreds of miles away, as our new locale. The Mirror found me a suitably neglected and decrepit building, an outer shell for the inner contents of Bourgeois House, including Cinderella, Shilzad and myself. For form's sake, and to allay the alarm of our new neighbors, I sent along a luggage-cart manned by golts.

When we were gone, there was nothing left of our old Bourgeois House but a shell of empty walls — precisely what Rassigart discovered, when he arrived that evening on an exhausted horse.

I watched in my Mirror as he stood in the yawning doorway, trem-

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bling with weariness and rage. The abandoned walls were utterly featureless, because we had taken even the paint. No ceilings left either, not so much as a rafter, just the unnatural slopes of an unsupported roof. The whole interior of the building had been erased like a pencil drawing.

"You won't escape me, sorceress!" the Prince howled at the echoing walls.

I laughed at him, from behind my Mirror. "It's you who won't escape," I said aloud.

Diary of Ashterat: August 8, 636

My mother died tonight.

I was uneasy all evening, sensing something momentous about to happen. Joy, terror.... It was my presentiment of Shilzad's death: her final decay, her liberation.

I heard her rise from her bed in the middle of the night. No, not hearing — rather, a feeling deep inside me, light as a cold breeze. It broke me from my usual uneasy dreams and I awoke and unbuckled my armor. I always slept in armor now. It made the cushions of my bed seem as rough as horsehair rugs, but I had to sleep with proper safeguards. The waking world was a cozier place for me, so I put aside the night's breastplate and my daggers.

I slipped silently into the hall, looked toward my mother's room, and saw her standing there, in the open doorway.

The long starvation had stripped her of all femininity; she was Lady Death now, white shroud, gaunt skin that bound a skeleton in leather. Black rags hung from both her hands, dangling like cobwebs from the dry, unhealed, unfestering wounds in her arms. I was amazed to see her on her feet.

She walked down the corridor, face set, eyes blank and rigid. She stepped into a closet, opened a chest. I heard her nails scrabbling at the wooden lid, the leathery crackling of her skin.

She was choosing a dress. After another moment she rose with a shining wad of fabric under her arms, all mixed with the dangling rags. Then, with one leaden step, she moved directly into the World Outside — and I followed her.

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In an instant we were at the Taskre Palace — or rather, its ruins. It was night here.

I had not been here for ages. The Palace had fallen during my childhood, in an orgy of looting and burning, and what memories I had of it were bitter. The walls were empty, gems long gone, paneling stripped away, marble floor shattered and covered with filth. To think that once this had been King Mennach's Grand Hall.

I stayed in the shadows behind my mother, flitting from column to column, pressing myself against them. Her skeletal body was silhouetted in the moonlight of a glassless window. Then she spread out the bundle in her arms — a queenly robe of the finest armelin. Nothing but holes now, rotten, threadbare, but what else could be expected? She threw it over her bony shoulders with the grace of a monarch. A golden circlet gleamed in her taloned hands: the tarnished crown of the Taskre Queen, unseen for countless decades in the bottom of that chest. The symbol of Taskre majesty had once looked so lovely on her raven tresses; now she fitted it to her hairless skull. She bowed to the silent applause of long-vanished courtiers, with infinite dignity.

The Queen my mother had arrived at her final rendezvous. Now I saw another presence. Just for a moment. A deeper darkness in the shadow, emerging from the depths of night, arms spread in welcome. A rippling shadow in a cold draft of wind, a bodiless phantom. Both cruel and merciful. Another woman. Lady Death.

The two Queens embraced one another.

Shilzad died without a struggle. She fell slowly, and the circlet crown jolted free and rolled off into the ruins. And then I heard, from no direction at all, a terrible voiceless cry from the Sleeper in the Clock. A howl from the abyss, a wail of grief for the woman lost to him so long ago.

Diary of Ashterat: September 26, 636.

I have not written in this diary for many days. I haven't the patience to write in my diary when my life has no crisis. Nothing important, nothing remarkable.

I have watched in my Mirror as envoys from the court of Harkur have been methodically scouring the entire countryside. Carrying the crystal slipper.

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I've seen them try the slipper on the feet of countless women. There's nothing particularly dainty about the size and shape of Cinderella's feet, but I created that slipper for her alone. No other woman alive can succeed in wearing that slipper. Because of this, I know that the royal envoys will reach this place, in due time. I calculate it to be about the middle of October.

Diary of Ashterat: October 13, 636

It seems my calculation was off by a few days. The envoys have been very industrious and are half a week early.

They arrived this afternoon and proceeded directly to the city square. There they bellowed out a royal edict and demanded that every woman of marriageable age gather in the square at six o'clock. Then the envoys retired to a tavern.

They still fulfill their duties in all respect and obedience, but the long routine of fruitless search has apparently dented their morale a bit.

I gave Shina a lovely new pair of gleaming pearly stockings, and left her happily scrubbing her feet in the kitchen washtub. As for me, I am going to retire in good order to the Forest Mansion.

Diary of Ashterat: October 15, 636

I don't know why I changed my mind and insisted on witnessing their meeting. My presence in the royal palace could only provoke the Prince. Perhaps he would explode in terror or rage, and I would have to flee and move Bourgeois House once more. Despite all these forebodings, I found myself almost as eager for this meeting as the blushingly lovely Mademoiselle Young Bride.

It was evening when we arrived at Arkhold. We were housed in the Palace as the chief envoy went to carry the happy news to the Prince. I wore a heavy green veil, which I never put aside, and the servants took me for Shina's mother. Certain men might well have recognized me from the ball, but those men were dead.

We met for a supper and tête-a-tête, the Prince, Shina, and I.

The warmth of their reunion was a bit cooled by proper etiquette. With a chaperone present they did not dare to embrace. Rather than

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kissing, they talked — at great length, and on the Prince's side, very ornamentally. The Prince was shining-eyed and reverent and Shina blushed like a ripe strawberry. The thought of these two virgins at their wedding night made me smile behind my veil.

When the Prince addressed me formally I was forced to unveil myself. He stared at me as if I were a ghost, or his own death. Indeed, I might be both those things.

"Your Highness's kind greeting touches me deeply," I said. "I am Esther, Shina's foster sister." I thanked him for his kindness. I thanked him for his invitation. I thanked him for the honor done my family: words, words, words. It was going to be a very long night.

SHINA, EXHAUSTED by excitement and the long journey, fell asleep at midnight. The Prince and I were made of sterner stuff, and soon afterward I received a discreet royal billet-doux demanding an immediate audience with Rassigart, if I had "any trace of honor." We met in the dark of night at a small, out-of-the-way Palace room, very similar to the last one. Carelessness was obviously Rassigart's dominant trait.

"Astra, how is it that you dare to enter my Palace once again?"

"I've never dared that, Your Highness. I've always been invited here. By you."

"I invited the girl who lost her slipper at my ball. I never asked for a sorceress!" He rose threateningly, his eyes blazing, but I did not bother to bind him with a spell. He was already bound, for I was Shina's sister, and to denounce or attack me as a sorceress was to lose his beloved.

I shrugged. "It's not my fault that Shina is my dear relation."

"I can't believe she is any such thing. You must have murdered her parents to become her evil guardian. What terrible thing did you do to them?"

I laughed in his face. "You'll be a weak ruler, Rassigart, for you can't control your passions. You're in no position now to succumb to some passing fit of pique. How much abuse do you think you can heap on me, before I demand my honor and satisfaction?" I frowned at him. "Now sit down, shut up, and listen to me. Shina's father is long dead, he was mortal and he died of a cancer, as mortals often do. Shina's mother died very

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young. My mother married her father despite the best we could do to dissuade her, and now my mother is dead as well. I'm all the family she has left."

"That's a strange set of changes, Astra. If Astra is indeed your name. Is it Esther now? Are any of these aliases real?"

"My name is Ashterat," I said patiently. "There were four of us: my mother, my sister Hildur, myself, and Cinderella — that is, your darling Shina. Hildur is gone now. She fell to the lust for blood, as your man Gallengur so cleverly discovered."

"Hildur," he said. "I've heard that name before."

"One presumes that Your Highness has read that name. In the Golden Codex of Arkhold. Try to recall your lessons in the Legend of Mennach."

He turned his back on me, for a long time. When he faced me again, all his anger was gone. Instead: open loathing.

"So you've chosen to toy with me, Taskre princess?" he said. He was full of icy control now, with a murderous edge. "You chose to torture me because, unlike yourself, I'm a human being. Merely some human being." His eyes were cold. "You disgust me."

He stepped nearer, trembling with revulsion. "The legends all lie! You don't match your glowing reputation, Ashterat. You Taskres claim to protect us from the World Outside — well, who ever asked you to? It's a sham, a confidence trick — just a way to remind us humans of our impotence. You're not our guardians, but our exploiters. You hold yourselves above us, and you think yourselves too fine for us, and you toy with us." He locked eyes with me. I shuddered to see the changes roiling within his mind. His hot and righteous anger hammered at his soul like a smith's work at an anvil. Tempering formless metal into a blade. In a passing flume of mental sparks I saw the last of his childhood vanish.

"You don't speak!" he shouted. "Believe me, you'll never see me afraid of you again! Kill me if you think it will please you — an act that will make you even more loathsome than we already know you to be. If you have any conscience at all, your crimes should drive you crazy."

"Then let my conscience kill me, and don't interfere with what I must do."

He seized me by the shoulders and brought his face very close. "Ashterat, during that ball there were five men murdered! All of them my dear friends — or, at the least, the Crown's trusted servants. I know very

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well who killed them! Wherever you walk, there are corpses. Do you expect me to simply watch that happening? Are you laughing at me?"

"You're consumed to know my secrets, Prince. Five men dead, and yet you don't ask me why. Why! The reasoning behind it."

"Can there be any reason for such crimes?"

My face grew taut. Of course there was a reason. It was my Quest. My Quest, now weighed against the happiness of my only living sister. A conflict I'd hoped to avoid, that now yawned before my feet like the gate of Hell.

Of course I could have asked Rassigart the Question. I could have put the Question to him during the ball, slipped that same cup into his hands that five dead men had grasped and gulped from so eagerly. Somehow I had managed not to think of Rassigart, somehow I had hidden him in the recesses of my own mind, and through that mercy spared him.

There were excellent reasons to spare Rassigart. He was the last Crown Prince; if he too were lost, the death of his father the King would plunge the country into dynastic warfare. And my Cinderella loved Rassigart so much. And I did not want to kill this angry and careless boy, because I had a weakness for him. The curse of Mennach! The same weakness that I had for his brother.

Immoral weakness. Shameful weakness.

Compassion was treachery to my Quest. All men were equal before the Question. Suppose that Rassigart were the man. How many other men would die needlessly in his proper place?

"I'll tell you everything," I said, and every word was like wormwood in my mouth. "I'll tell you what I told those five dead men, and many others besides, and your noble brother, too."

I shrugged free from his hands. Then I seized him myself, and with a terrible strength I dragged him with me to the World Outside.

When we arrived at length at the chamber with the clock, I gave Rassigart the goblet.

Diary of Ashterat: October 21, 636

The celebration started yesterday and it will go on for five days straight. This royal fête will find permanent records in many places

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besides this, my diary. Harkur hasn't seen a wedding of this size and extravagance since
558, when Rassigart's great-grandfather tied the knot with a Southern princess. All this splendor looks very deliberate: to erase the bitterness of Lavendul's death, and to obscure the humble origins of the chosen bride, all at one magnificent stroke.

I had a chance to say farewell to my sister, to wish her the best of luck. I did not imagine I would have any chance to speak to Rassigart again. But he sought me out himself — and found me, alone, before my Mirror.

"What's this?" he said with scorn. "Princess Ashterat the Taskre, at her toilette? With her finery, trinkets and face paint?"

"Do you imagine that everything human tires me, O Prince?"

"I would have thought that centuries of life would have given you a bit more depth," he said spitefully, and shut the double doors behind himself. He walked across the room to confront me.

"I prefer the darker palaces of the World Outside," I told him. "It's true, I tried to seek real wisdom once. I read old scribblings on damp leather and yellowing parchment and crumbling rolls of papyrus. I've had a very long time to spend at learning, and I've read almost every work, major and minor, of the world's philosophers...but Rassigart, there is nothing to all that. It's all pretension and fraud."

"So you say."

"So, I came back to worldliness. I love beautiful dresses and exotic perfumes and I love to do my brows, to paint my lashes. I love to touch the flesh of naked men. I love a wild ride in darkness and the taste of cold rain on my face, even if it means I have to change my gown and re-do my coiffure afterward. Can you understand that? In a few centuries I grew very tired of everything that you think is eternal and wise. The only things I truly value now are frivolous and superficial."

His thoughts bristled with shocked disapproval and he waved his hand dismissively.

"It's very strange that a clean and decent girl like Shina could share the home of a creature like you."

"We didn't discuss philosophy and I never bothered to instruct her in decadence!" I said, and I smirked. I stood in front of him and searched his face. How had he managed to do it? How had he survived the temptation

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that had killed Lavendul and Gallengur and so many others?

"I'd like to have you jailed or executed," he told me, with cold deliberation. "If it weren't for Shina, I would do that without a qualm. After the wedding, Princess Shina will dwell in my Palace and you will leave at once for your usual den of iniquity. It is my order that you should never meet her again."

It happened just as he wanted it.

I didn't bother to wait for the end of the celebration. I left today. One long step to reach the Forest Mansion. From there, to Bourgeois House. Weary with searching. Now, forever alone. I was less than honest when I praised the advantages of my feminine vanities. I had diversions fuller and more satisfying than merely human pleasures. And pains and sorrows also greater than human.

Pondering our encounter in Forest Mansion, I hit upon the strange core of young Prince Rassigart: shy yet domineering, passionate but prudish. He was like someone I had missed for centuries. All of that lost to me now.

He simply refused to drink the potion. He laughed in the frozen face of Mennach and he took up the filled goblet I offered and he dashed it to the floor. It shattered there into hundreds of pieces.

Diary of Ashterat: Undecimber 3, 644

What a strange sensation to page back over this diary again, after more than seven years!

The windowsills are heaped with winter snow, the fire crackles in the hearth, I'm muffled in a blanket and reading these pages. Seven years, but I am still Ashterat the Taskre, unchanged. What difference could a mere seven years make to me? I am no wiser, scarcely any older. Years of struggle and worry bring one no greater balance or insight. People may believe that suffering brings wisdom, but they ought to know better. All it brings is early senility.

The attacks from the Beasts Outside have continued, sometimes fierce and frequent and spoiling all my nights. At other times, almost like a long weary truce between us. It has been like this for eight years now. I have survived it, but it has not made me more beautiful.

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I retrieved my neglected diary yesterday, because of a presentiment. I knew somehow that the tale told here, after a long interregnum, would continue in some epilogue. And I was right. This evening, a carriage and four royal horses brought me Cinderella again, for the first time in seven years.

Pacing back and forth in the room where she'd once lived — though in a different city, of course — she brought life and movement to my unearthly stillness and solitude. No one has been dusting in Cinderella's room, and the golden laces of her courtier's silk gown stirred up years of filth. Her innocence has faded, and so has her fragility and freshness, but they've not been replaced by what I expected for her: domestic contentment, matronly sensuality. She has an injured, fretful look, a face stiff with vengeance and enmity. She has given King Rassigart two daughters. Daughters only, no proper heir apparent. Court life has not been easy.

As we talked, she tapped her golden slippered foot impatiently on the floor.

"He's filled the Palace with riffraff," she said bitterly. "Debased cronies of his. Village idiots. Common harlots! Alley cats and mongrels and vermin! How can I bear it, Ashterat? I can't stand another moment! No one shows me the proper respect."

I remembered the day of Shina's sweet pity for a rabid fox and I had to marvel at the depth of the changes within her. Perhaps it was wiser to marvel at myself: stale, changeless, unmarked by any passion — petrified deep in the amber of time.

"Why demand so much respect, Cinderella? You're just a pretty little bourgeoise."

Her lips went thin and pale. "Never again call me Cinderella! Never!"

"Maybe I'm right to remind you of the truth."

Shina's hands went limp. Suddenly she was like a child again: a temperament like April weather. Mouth gone bitter with disappointment, her face was a mask of deep sorrow. "Oh, Ashterat! They remind me of that every day."

Her life was difficult, but I couldn't rouse myself to pity her. Instead, I wondered what the passing years had done to her consort, King Rassigart.

Diary of Ashterat: March 6, 644

Three months have passed. Shina cannot keep herself away from me.

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She was thinner now, her cheeks gone hollow, face full of strain and some deep and thoughtful interior struggle: a unique experience, for her. She'd been driven here to me, almost against her will. I knew the moment I saw her shifty eyes that she had come to me with a purpose.

She wanted something from me, something only I could give, and she was trying to work up the courage to demand it. Our conversation, if you could call it that, was full of pauses and uncertainties. Life had carried us so far apart that Queen Shina and I had nothing to discuss.

Finally she broke out: "Ashterat! I can't live by his side any longer. Give me a poison!"

"Poison? For you?"

"No." She smirked. "For the King."

If I refused her, she would try something else. Lady Death has countless faces for humanity and to find a method to kill is not difficult, even for a Queen.

But if I chose, I night leave some small hope for the King.

For the King, if not for Shina.

I found a vial for her and I filled it to the rim with the Potion.

Diary of Ashterat: March 9, 644

He was older now, the age Lavendul had once been, and he had not forgotten the dark bond between us. It brought him to Bourgeois House.

A storm was raving this night, not any storm of my doing. It was a storm with the taint of the Beasts Outside, full of baffled fury. I saw him skulking past my window, lit by a flash of thunder, and I opened the gate to let him in.

He was drenched, his dark hair plastered to his forehead. He wore no hooded mantle, this time.

"Shina is dead!" he told me. "When I survived the poison, she drank it herself, and it killed her. Why did you spare me so long, Ashterat?"

"Because you refused it."

"I really refused to drink?" He was unbelieving.

I laughed at him. We slipped together into the World Outside. To Forest Mansion, to the room of the clock. Everything veiled in dust.

"Strike the midnight!" I screamed at the clock.

But the clock did not strike.

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Rassigart raised both hands in a gesture of power, and beneath his steady gaze the ancient wood of the clock cracked and gave way. The mosaic face shattered, and the machine fell into a heap. I watched, without moving, without trembling, without fear. Within the shattered debris I thought I saw a pale shape rising upward, as thin and formless as a sigh of relief.

The new King — the Taskre King! — turned toward me.

His mind was ablaze with strange and terrible light. I could not bear those glowing eyes. His hands on my flesh were like two coals. He pressed possessive, icy lips on mine, and I knew he was not human any longer.

I will not write in my diary any longer. I do not need to write any more. Other people will write about us now. They will tell our story nonetheless.

But they will never dare to tell everything.

Another Time Travel Pair o' Ducks.

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COMING ATTRACTIONS

WE HAVE MANY wonderful surprises for you in 1997. Spectacular cover stories, stunning novellas, and of course, the short fiction that you've come to expect from *F&SF*.

In February, we begin with one of the best science fiction stories of the year. **Robert Reed** has written a lovely adventure story about dragons, the future, and the meaning of the past in "The Dragons of Springplace." Well known gallery artist (and *F&SF* cover artist) **Kent Bash**, who did our acclaimed June cover illustrated the story. (Both the February cover and the June cover are available as posters which you can order from our Connecticut office. See ad for details.)

Also in February, **Sheila Finch** returns with another lingster story. In "A Flight of Words," she explores yet another moral corner of the universe inhabited by the Guild of Xenolinguists — a group occasionally devoid of moral codes.

Acclaimed fantasist **Richard Bowes** contributes another Kevin Grierson story to *F&SF*. The Kevin Grierson stories are urban fantasies set mostly in New York; the first "On Death and the Deuce" was chosen for *The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror*. Yet our February offering is perhaps the best Kevin Grierson story. "Drink and the Devil" will make you smile even as it breaks your heart.

Mike Resnick will make his first appearance in February as an occasional columnist. He'll be finding old treasures for us, reminding us of sf books we may have missed, and telling us how to find them.

In future issues, watch for a stunning sf novella by **Adam-Troy Castro**, more heart-felt fantasies from **Dale Bailey**, and some much needed humor from **Ron Goulart.** Watch too for new writers: **Mary Soon Lee** and **Jacquelyn Hooper.** If you haven't renewed your subscription yet, now is the perfect time.

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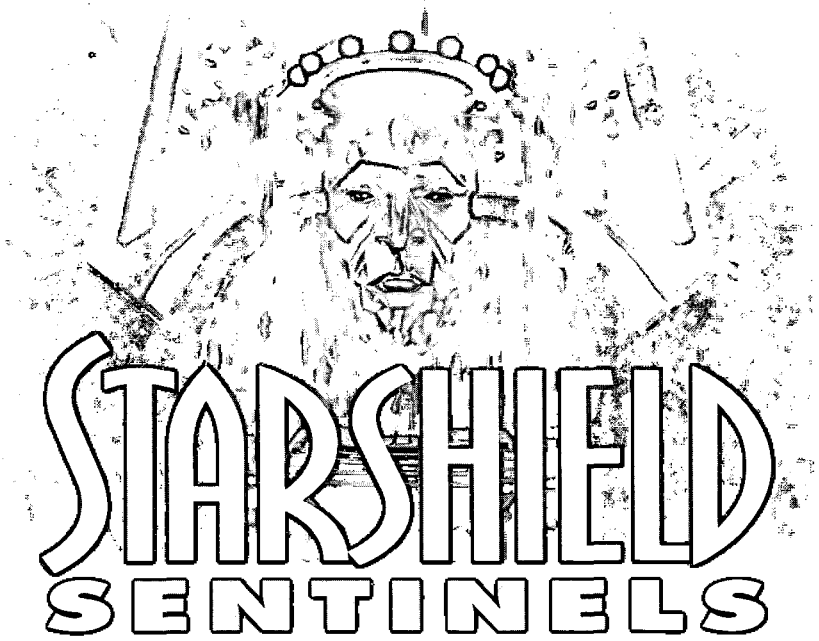

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